



The metaphysics and epistemology of conscious perception

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Abstract

Some metaphysical disjunctivists about conscious perceptual experience argue that their position has attractive, anti-sceptical, epistemological consequences. Perceiving a particular round red ball is a matter of being in a conscious condition, which serves as the ground for judgement that that thing is round and red, that is inconsistent with the falsity of that judgement. For it consists in a relation of acquaintance with that very thing and its shape and colour. Hence the ground for judgement suffices for its truth in a way that contributes to understanding the status of the judgement as knowledgeable. Here I explore an analogous way in which it might be argued that the metaphysics of conscious perception may have epistemological benefits. This concerns, not the fact that such experience consists in the relational presentation of particular worldly objects and their perceptible properties, but the fact that it consists in their presentation from a particular point of view. This is what enables perception of those particular worldly things, rather than any others, and makes sense of their continued existence unperceived. For this point of view may evidently change, independently of the existence and nature of what is presented on any specific occasion, leaving those very things as they are, although now unperceived.

Keywords Metaphysics of perception · Object view · Knowledge of shape and colour · Understanding of continued existence unperceived

1 Introduction

My concern here is the significance of the metaphysics of conscious perceptual experience for various epistemological issues concerning perception. Before proceeding, it is worth distinguishing two questions about the relation between the metaphysics and epistemology of any given domain of thought.

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First, and familiarly, to what extent, if at all, is the metaphysics of the domain itself dependent on, or constrained by, the epistemology, broadly speaking, of the way in which we come to think about or know about that domain? Here views range from (a) various forms of idealism at one extreme, according to which the elements of the domain in question, or the truths concerning them, are somehow constituted by or reducible to (facts about) our mode of access to, or experience of them; to (b) industrial strength realism, according to which issues in metaphysics should always and everywhere be pursued entirely independently of any consideration of our access to or our knowledge of the domain in question.¹

Although it is not the focal issue in what follows, my own view is intermediate between these two extremes. We can only coherently frame the relevant metaphysical questions of the nature of a given domain on the basis of a determinate identification of its elements. And a crucial contribution to that identification may be made by the nature of our epistemic access to that domain. For we are concerned with the metaphysics of a specific actual domain—those F-things or that G-subject-matter—rather than with the logic of a merely possible domain. This in turn may make a significant impact on its correct metaphysics, although the existence and content of any such impact should be assessed on a case-by-case basis over various quite different domains: aesthetic, mathematical, modal, moral, primary quality observational, secondary quality observational, scientific, and so on. Of course, how best to distinguish domains, and what contribution may be made to theorizing concerning their metaphysics by broadly epistemological considerations in each case, are all substantive and controversial issues. I will not pursue them further here.²

My focus instead is on a second, less familiar question about the relation between metaphysical and epistemological issues, in relation to the particular domain of ordinary ‘macroscopic’ physical objects and their perceptible properties. This concerns the significance of the metaphysics of our perceptual experience of such things for the correct broadly epistemological account of our knowledge and understanding of them and their natures. The contrast between the first and second questions is that between evaluating the role of the epistemology of our access to a given domain in determining the correct metaphysics for that domain, on the one hand, and evaluating the role of the metaphysics of our access to a given domain in the correct epistemology with respect to that domain, on the other. My concern is with the latter, in particular connection with our perceptual experiential access to ordinary objects in the world around us. That is to say, what is the role of the metaphysics of conscious perceptual experience in elucidating our knowledge and understanding of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive?

¹ This debate has a long and complex philosophical history. For exemplary variants of (a), see Berkeley (1975a, 1975b); Kant (1929); Foster (2023); and Dummett (1978, 1991). For exemplary variants of (b), see Lewis (1986, 1999); Van Inwagen (1990); Sider (2001, 2011).

² I take this intermediate view to be the result of taking seriously constraints that proponents of (a) argue entail some form of idealism whilst demonstrating that these are in many cases consistent with a realism that proponents of (b) claim is only defensible in their absence.

2 Knowledge of shapes and colours

One aspect of this issue has received considerable discussion recently: the potential epistemological benefits of metaphysical disjunctivism.³ I pave the way for my main discussion of an analogous issue in §3 below by giving a partial elaboration of how things seem to me to stand in this debate.

According to what I shall call the standard view, perceptual experience of a round red ball, say, is in itself neutral on the question whether there is a round red ball there at all. It is a common element between the good perceptual case and the bad case of an introspectively indistinguishable hallucination (Burge, 2005; Grice, 1961; Robinson, 1994; Siegel, 2004; Sturgeon, 1998). Whether or not the experience is genuinely perceptual is a matter of how that common experiential element is brought about, either in the right way by the presence of a round red ball, or by some other means such as artificial stimulation of the visual system. The ground for judgement that there is a round red ball there provided by experience in the perceptual case is therefore identical to that given by the very same experience in the hallucinatory case when there is no such thing. So, to adapt a formulation due to McDowell (1982), for all one knows on the basis of that experiential ground, even in the genuinely perceptual case, there may not be a round red ball there at all. There is a clear and specific sense in which perceptual experience fails to constitute a ground for knowledge of the shapes and colours of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive. For, even in the good case, possession of such experience itself fails to rule out possible cases of falsity in our relevant judgements.

This point does not apply to the disjunctive view, according to which, in the perceptual case, but not in the case of an introspectively indistinguishable hallucination, the shapes and colours of the ordinary objects that we perceive are constituents of the experience itself (Brewer, 2011; Campbell, 2002; Hinton, 1973; Martin, 1998, 2002; McDowell, 1982, 1987; Snowdon, 1980–81; Soteriou, 2016). On my own Object View, (OV), for example (Brewer, 2011, 2018a, 2018b), perceptual experience consists in a relation of conscious acquaintance, from a particular point of view and in specific circumstances, with those very objects and certain of their perceptible properties. A good-case perceptual experience of a round red ball straight ahead in normal circumstances, for example, consists in being acquainted from that point of view and in those circumstances with that very ball and its shape and colour. Hallucinatory experience has a quite different metaphysical nature, in spite of its introspective indistinguishability: it is simply derivative experience introspectively indistinguishable from genuine perceptual acquaintance with a round red ball. The ground for judgement that there is a round red ball there provided by experience in the good perceptual case is therefore sufficient for the truth of that judgement. So, in the same clear and specific sense, perceptual experience itself does constitute a ground for knowledge of the shapes and colours of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive.

³ For arguments in favour of disjunctivism on this basis, see esp. McDowell, 1982, 1994, 2008b. I mention various lines of objection to these arguments with references at the end of section 2 below.

Significant further assumptions are required to move from these observations to the conclusion that some form of metaphysical disjunctivism is essential to an adequate epistemology of perception, and many moves are made in the literature to resist these assumptions. In particular, it may be denied in a variety of ways that perceptual knowledge depends on the claim that the nature of experience itself provides a ground for judgement about the shapes and colours of what we perceive that is sufficient on its own for truth. For later reference, call this the claim that experience is sufficient for truth, (EST). The following are three prominent such denials of (EST).

1. Perceptual experience need not provide a rational ground for judgements about the shapes and colours of things, with respect to which their standing as knowledge is to be explained (Davidson, 2001; Roessler, 2009; Williamson, 2000).
2. It must provide such a ground, but this need not be sufficient for the truth of the judgements in question. Perhaps all that is required instead is that perceptual experience is in general a reliable cause of true beliefs about such matters (Dretske, 1981; Goldman, 1988; Nozick, 1981, Ch. 3; Peacocke, 1985; Sosa, 1991).
3. It must provide such a ground, and this must be sufficient for their truth, but the ground need not be provided by the nature of experience itself: it may also depend on its context and causation (Millar, 2019; Pritchard, 2012).⁴

But I leave this debate here for now, as an illustration of the analogous debate that I pursue in more detail below.

3 Understanding of continued existence unperceived

According to what I shall call the orthodox view, our point of view and other circumstances of perception are causal determinants of our perceptual experience, which is in itself constitutively independent of these factors. On my Object View, on the other hand, our perceptual experience itself consists in a relation of conscious acquaintance, from a particular point of view and in those specific circumstances, with particular worldly objects and certain of their perceptible properties. Just as the objects and their shapes and colours that we see are on this view constituents of our conscious condition, as they are on any disjunctive view, so are our point of view and other relevant circumstances of perception, such as the lighting conditions, for example. In §2 above, I sketched an incomplete argument for the claim that, as a variant of disjunctivism, the Object View has epistemological benefits over what I there called the standard view in relation to the provision of an adequate account of perceptual knowledge of the shapes and colours of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive. My thesis in what follows is that the Object View also has significant epistemological benefits over the orthodox view with which I began this section, with respect to our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive.

I begin with the following proposal, which I call the Objectivity of Perception, (OP). Our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive is provided directly by the subjective nature of our perceptual experience. That is, the subjective nature of such experience provides a fully intelligible

⁴ Denials under (2) and (3) may be more notational than substantive variants.

explanation of our belief in the continued existence of such things beyond the duration of that very experience of them, because it is not possible adequately to capture what it is like for us to perceive the world as we do without mentioning the evident continued existence unperceived in this sense of what we perceive.

Like (EST), I have no conclusive independent argument for (OP). In this sense, what follows depends on simply granting it as our starting point. Unlike (EST), though, (OP) is not an epistemological-theoretical thesis, but part of a commonsense description of normal adult perception that strikes me as entirely compelling as it stands. Furthermore, explicit opposition to (OP) rests on assumptions about how our understanding of continued existence unperceived might possibly be grounded in perception that I argue are limited by the orthodox view. My response to such opposition is to reject these limiting assumptions and to explain how our options for intelligible explanation expand significantly on the Object View.

First, I grant that their continued existence unperceived is not a feature of ordinary physical objects that we are acquainted with in the way that we are acquainted with their shapes and colours. The suggestion that it might be barely makes sense. For their continuing to exist beyond our current experience of them does not make any determinate qualitative difference to the way they now look. There is and could be no such qualitative difference. This is something that Hume and others sceptical of a purely perceptual source for our understanding of continued existence unperceived get absolutely right (Hume, 1978, esp. I.4.ii; Mackie, 2019; Spener, 2012). Their arguments against (OP) depend upon the further assumption that the subjective nature of our perceptual experience is the intelligible source of our understanding of continued existence unperceived only if it does involve such acquaintance with continued existence unperceived in precisely the way that we are acquainted with shapes and colours. I reject this further assumption and explain how the Object View opens up a natural and compelling alternative for the proponent of (OP).

Similarly, second, the orthodox view faces a dilemma in attempting to provide an account of the source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive in any aspect of the representational content of perceptual experience.⁵ On this approach, the way things are in the world around us, together with our changing point of view upon them and other circumstances of perception jointly determine the continuous input to complex computations performed by our subpersonal perceptual systems issuing as output in an evolving representation of how things are out there. It is controversial how rich the representational contents of perceptual experience produced in this way may be.⁶ But it is not necessary to take a stand on that

⁵ Recall that the orthodox view is defined as any view on which our point of view and other circumstances of perception are causal determinants of our perceptual experience, which is in itself constitutively independent of these factors. The current dilemma is an objection to the most familiar implementation of the orthodox view, according to which the nature of perceptual experience is given by its representational content, jointly causally determined by the way things are in the world and the subject's point of view and other circumstances upon them. The considerations in the previous paragraph constitute an objection to implementing the orthodox view in any kind of simple relational account, either to mind-dependent sense data, or to mind-independent things. In what follows I offer my Object View as an explicit alternative to all of these variants of the orthodox view.

⁶ For an overview of some of the arguments and oppositions here, see Siegel and Byrne, 2016, which also contains a helpful bibliography of other important contributions.

issue here. For the approach faces a dilemma dividing over the question whether the continued existence unperceived of worldly objects is explicitly represented in such contents, or not.

Suppose, on the one hand, that, regardless of how rich perceptual contents may be, the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive is never explicitly represented. In that case, our belief that the ordinary physical objects that we perceive continue to exist unperceived is derived by some kind of inference that goes beyond what is essential to the way things are for us in having such experience itself. Yet this is inconsistent with (OP), which constitutes our starting point for the current argument. For (OP) involves the idea that our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive is provided directly by the subjective nature of our perceptual experience.

Suppose, on the other hand, that continued existence unperceived is, at least on occasion, explicitly represented in the contents of perceptual experience. In that case, perceptual contents simply served up by our subpersonal perceptual systems represent various worldly objects as red, round, to the right, in front, or whatever, and as continuing to exist unperceived. The problem here is that it is one thing its being represented in perception, out of the blue, that these things continue to exist beyond our experience of them; it is quite another for any belief that we may form to that effect to be genuinely intelligible to us as the subjects of such experience. To repeat, (OP) involves the idea that our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive is provided directly by the subjective nature of our perceptual experience. That is, our belief in continued existence unperceived has its intelligible source in perception. For it is not possible adequately to capture what it is like for us to perceive the world as we do without mentioning the evident continued existence unperceived of what we perceive. Yet this aspect of (OP) is entirely absent on this version of the representational account. The challenge posed by (OP) is to explain the way in which conscious perception constitutes the source of our understanding how the very things presented to us in experience might continue to exist unperceived. Insisting that its contents explicitly claim that they do so may explain its brute production of the belief that they do so in some cases; but it goes nowhere to explain its contribution to the intelligibility of any such belief in our understanding of how that might be so.

Thus, the orthodox representational view currently under consideration either fails to explain the purely perceptual source of our belief in continued existence unperceived or fails to account for the genuine intelligibility of any such belief as perception may prompt. Either way, it is incompatible with the intended interpretation of (OP).⁷

I contend, then, that the only way to make proper sense of the perceptual source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive involves acknowledging more to the nature of perceptual experience than the objects and properties presented, or any way in which those things are represented as being. The Object View is ideally placed to recognize and account

⁷ See Brewer (2020a; 2020b) and forthcoming for detailed elaboration of these arguments, and others, against the compatibility of (OP) with the orthodox view. I also consider there, in some detail, more sophisticated variants of the representational implementation of the orthodox view that are also ultimately found wanting.

for this, in its deliberate opposition to the orthodox view: our perceptual experience consists in a relation of conscious acquaintance, from a particular point of view and in those specific circumstances, with particular objects and certain of their perceptible properties. I argue that this admission of our point of view and other circumstances of perception into the subjective nature of perceptual experience, as opposed to regarding these simply as causal determinants independent of the nature of conscious experience itself, opens the way for a fully adequate account of (OP).

The key to this account is the distinction, central to (OV), between the contents and the form of perceptual experience understood as follows. The contents of a perceptual experience are the objects, and their shapes and colours and other perceptible properties, with which we are consciously acquainted in having that experience; its form is the particular point of view, orientation, and other relevant circumstances of perception, from which we are acquainted with those worldly things. All genuinely perceptual experiences have contents, such as the round red ball that I see out there in front of me now, and its shape and its colour; and all such experiences also have a form, in this case, my particular location, here, my orientation, and the other relevant circumstances of perception. Other possible experiences have the same contents with a different form, e.g. an experience of the same ball from over there in slightly brighter lighting conditions; and other possible experiences again have same form with different contents, as when my daughter comes along and kicks the ball away and stands in its place there before me.

The epistemological focus in §2 is on the contents of perceptual experience. Here in §3 my focus is on its form. This registers, directly in the metaphysics of conscious perception itself, the dependence of our perception of the particular objects and properties that we perceive on a given occasion on our meeting certain spatiotemporal and other enabling conditions on our acquaintance with those things that might subsequently fail to be met. My proposal is that this is what provides us with our basic perceptually-based understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive.

The proposal may be seen as a metaphysical implementation of what I regard as an important insight of Evans's (1985) 'Things Without the Mind', that an illuminating philosophical account of our understanding of continued existence unperceived must give a central role to the joint dependence of our perception upon what is there in the world anyway and the satisfaction of further independent enabling conditions on our perception of it that may subsequently fail to obtain. It is a datum that the nature of our perceptual experience does depend upon these two factors. Evans's insight is that this dependence must show up in our experiential perspective upon the world; and the natural way to interpret this in turn is that it must be evident in our own second-order reflection on the nature of that very experience. My proposal replaces this interpretation with a condition on the first order metaphysics of conscious perceptual experience itself.

The essential role of a literal point of view, a spatial location and appropriate orientation, in the metaphysics of conscious perceptual experience is what makes evident in its subjective nature the joint dependence of what we perceive upon what is there in the world and additional, independent enabling conditions on our current acquaintance with it, where these are conditions that may later fail to obtain. Thus, any perceptual

experience is, in its nature, as the specific modification of consciousness it is, that is, as it is for its subject, a take on its worldly objects, from here, which therefore apparently continue beyond it, absent this particular take upon them. Conscious perceptual experience therefore constitutes the source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive.

In contrast with the natural interpretation of Evans's insight sketched above, this is a resolutely first-order account of (OP), without any reference to our second-order reflection on the nature of our experience. Nevertheless, I claim that it meets the crucial requirement that perceptual experience should be the source of our belief in the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive in a way that is genuinely intelligible to us simply as the subjects of that very experience. For it is an application to the particular case of (OP) of the general idea that the metaphysics of conscious perception should be explanatory of the nature of perceptual consciousness: what it is like for the subject of perception with that metaphysics.

I also claim that the account I offer avoids the dilemma set out above against accounts appealing to the representational content of perception on the orthodox view. For the joint dependence of our perceptual experience upon what is there to be perceived and our point of view and other enabling conditions is constitutive of its subjective nature, rather than being operational only in the subpersonal computation of perceptual content simply served up fully formed, as it were, as it is on the orthodox view. It is precisely the latter picture that motivates the dilemma I set out for the representational implementation of the orthodox view, according to which this either fails to explain the purely perceptual source of our belief in continued existence unperceived or fails to account for the genuine intelligibility of any such belief as perception may prompt, depending on whether continued existence unperceived is not supposed to be explicitly represented in the contents of perceptual experience, on the one hand, or whether it is supposed to be explicitly so represented, on the other. According to my own account, the fact that our perceptual experience depends jointly upon what is there in the world anyway and our satisfaction of further independent spatial and orientational enabling conditions on our perception of the particular objects and properties out there with which we are on any occasion acquainted as the contents of that experience is essential to the characterization of what it is like for us as the subjects of that very experience. The continued existence unperceived of what we perceive is genuinely intelligible to us in the nature of our perceptual consciousness itself.

4 Strawson and descartes

On my (OV) account, the evident continued existence unperceived of ordinary physical objects is a more basic feature of our perceptual experience than any categorization that we may make of them as falling under specific kinds of persisting such things. This marks a contrast with an approach to (OP) that Strawson derives from Kant (1929), and which has also been adopted by a number of subsequent writers on the topic (See esp. McDowell, e.g. 1995, 2008a). Strawson's Kant begins with the observation that any accurate reflective description of our perceptions, which are themselves fleeting subjective events, must mention things that are not fleeting at all: their "distinct

and enduring objects” (1974, p. 87). I take this to be his gloss on my own starting assumption (OP). He goes on to claim that the fact that any accurate description of our experience should be objective in this sense depends on our application in that experience of concepts of specific kinds of enduring material things, to use his own example, our seeing something as a dog, or, in the case I have been considering, as a (round red) ball, say. The majority of his subsequent argument concerns what is involved in our application of such concepts in experience, and in particular the way in which it essentially involves our imagination. My own concern is rather with his initial contention that the perceptual source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of ordinary objects depends on our categorization of such things as falling under specific kinds of persisting such things at all.

My own account of (OP) rejects this dependence. Suppose that I see a particular round red ball in front of me. My experience has that ball and its shape and colour as contents regardless of whether I recognize the thing as a ball or categorize its shape or colour in any specific way. What it is like for me, consciously speaking, consists in my being acquainted with those things, from here. It therefore evidently depends jointly upon those things being there as they are and my being here, where the latter may subsequently fail to obtain, in such a way that the ball continues to exist, round and red as it is, unperceived, at least by me. I claim that this intelligibly explains my belief in its continued existence unperceived. Thus, our understanding of continued existence unperceived is not dependent on our categorization of the ordinary objects that we perceive as falling under specific persisting kinds.

Finally, a comparison with a somewhat similarly structured discussion of the Cartesian Circle (Descartes, 1986) may help to clarify and defend my position further.⁸ Descartes apparently commits himself to both of the following epistemic priority claims.

- (D1) I can know that everything clearly and distinctly perceived is true only if I first know that God exists and is no deceiver.
- (D2) I can know that God exists and is no deceiver only if I first know that everything clearly and distinctly perceived is true.

And commentators reasonably object that that would render his overall epistemology fatally circular.

Van Cleve rescues the Cartesian project by arguing that Descartes actually denies (D2). For (V1) does not depend on (V2), below.

- (V1) For all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then I know that p.
- (V2) I know that (for all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then p).

The proposal is that clearly and distinctly perceiving that p is a way of knowing that p that does not depend for its status as such on prior knowledge that clear and distinct perception is truth-conducive, or indeed infallible. Although it avoids the threat of circularity, Van Cleve’s move clearly stands in need of some elaboration of the nature of clear and distinct perception that makes its status as such a source of knowledge

⁸ This way of putting the potential circularity in Descartes’s epistemology, and the proposed key to avoiding it come directly from Van Cleve, 1979, with only minor modifications of formulation. Their application to the current discussion is my own.

theoretically intelligible. That is to say, how should we make sense of the truth of (V1) in the absence of (V2)? And here his own suggestion seems to be hyper-reliabilism: (V1) is grounded in the de facto infallibility of clear and distinct perception:

(V3) For all p , if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p , then p .

This may or may not be Descartes's considered view; and it may or may not be epistemologically acceptable. I have my doubts on both counts. But my purpose in setting out the account is to bring out its structural similarities with the disjunctivism of §2 and, in particular, with the (OV) account of (OP) in §3. In the former case, the disjunctivist position that I favour explains the status of perceiving that p as a way of knowing that p that does not depend for its status as such on prior knowledge that perception is truth-conducive on the basis of the fact that the perceptual experience that grounds judgement that p in the most basic cases of such knowledge consists in conscious acquaintance with the concrete worldly truth-makers of the grounded judgement that p . For example, when I come to know that the ball in front of me is round and red, my judgement that it is so is grounded on my consciousness of that very ball and its shape and colour themselves, a conscious experiential relation with those worldly things that therefore guarantees the truth of my judgement.⁹

In connection with the (OV) account of (OP), the proposal is that conscious perceptual experience constitutes the source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive in virtue of the fact that our experience of such things consists in our conscious acquaintance with them and certain of their perceptible properties, from a particular point of view and in certain specific circumstances. This is the way things are for us consciously, as the subjects of our perceptual experience of such things: being acquainted with them from here, say. It therefore evidently depends jointly upon those things being there as they are and our meeting further enabling conditions, such as being here rather than elsewhere, that may subsequently fail to obtain. Thus, conscious perceptual experience itself is the source of our understanding of continued existence unperceived that does not depend for its status as such on any second-order theoretical understanding of the general dependence of the course of our experience upon what is there in the world anyway and our continuous spatiotemporal route through it. I take this to provide a fully adequate explanation of the Objectivity of Perception.

I appreciate that my case is not yet fully made. Indeed, any clarification offered by the comparison with Van Cleve's Descartes may be more hindrance than help. For it brings into focus what is perhaps the most pressing objection to the (OV) account of (OP). It is one thing to elucidate the structural position that the account is supposed to adopt. It is quite another fully to vindicate its doing so.

On the account I offer, the metaphysics of (OV) is supposed to characterize the subjective nature of our conscious perceptual experience so as to illuminate its status as the source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive. Consideration of the Cartesian Circle in the current context suggests that its adequacy depends on meeting two conditions that the objector protests are incompatible. First, perceptual experience should be a source of our understanding

⁹ For further elaboration and defence of this approach, see my (Brewer, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) especially my response in the last of these to John McDowell.

of continued existence unperceived for us as its subject. For recall my gloss on (OP) at the outset, that experience explains our belief in the continued existence of what we perceive in a way that is intelligible to us as its subject. Second, our experience should serve as such a source independent of, and prior to, any second-order theoretical reflection that we may go in for on the general dependence of our experience upon what is there in the world and our place in it. His analogue of this combination is the key to Van Cleve's defence of Descartes: clear and distinct perception itself constitutes a genuine source of knowledge that does not depend for its status on any prior knowledge of its truth-conduciveness. I suggested that this depends upon some elaboration of the nature of clear and distinct perception that makes its status as such a source of knowledge theoretically intelligible; and raised a question about the epistemological adequacy of Van Cleve's Descartes's own hyper-reliabilism in response to this demand. I also argued above that the orthodox representational view cannot meet the first of the conditions on adequacy set out above: that experience should explain our belief in the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive in a way that is intelligible to us as its subject. For it either fails to explain the purely perceptual source of our belief in continued existence unperceived or fails to account for the intelligibility to us as perceivers of any such belief. The current objector asks how (OV) is supposed to fare any better without falling foul of the second condition on adequacy by making some appeal in explaining the intelligibility of our belief in the continued existence unperceived of what we perceive to our second-order reflection on its joint dependence upon the way things are in the world and our point of view. How is continued existence unperceived supposed to be made genuinely intelligible to us simply as the subject of our perceptual experience itself?

The crucial idea at the heart of the (OV) account is that the structure of what it is like for us as the subject of our conscious perceptual experience—its complex conjunction of independent contents and form—makes evident the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we are acquainted with as its contents by making evident to us how it is that those very things may continue in existence beyond that very experience of them.¹⁰ According to (OV), the subjective nature of our perceptual experience consists in our acquaintance with particular worldly objects and certain of their properties from a particular point of view and in certain specific circumstances. This characterizes the way things are for us consciously in perceiving those things from here now, say. Its being the joint upshot of the way things are in the world and our meeting additional enabling conditions on perceiving them is therefore an essential feature of our current modification of consciousness itself. That is to say, it is essential to our experience being the experience that it is for us as its subject. This makes evident to us how it might be that those very worldly things continue to exist in the absence of our perception of them: by our simply failing to meet the enabling conditions essential to the subjective nature of our experience. The theoretical metaphysics of (OV) makes explicit what is in this way experientially evident to us simply as the subject of our conscious perceptual experience of which this is the proposed metaphysics.

¹⁰ See Ayers, 1991, v. 1, Pt. III; and 2019, esp. Ch. 2 for a closely related discussion of the crucial role of the way in which perceptual experience makes evident to us how we know what we know on its basis, in making 'primary' such knowledge perspicuous to us as such.

In contrast, according to the orthodox representational view considered above, our perceptual experience simply serves up a report, computed by the subpersonal perceptual systems, on how things probably stand in some portion of the world around us. Even if this explicitly asserts that the worldly things in question continue to exist unperceived, we are entirely in the dark as to how this might possibly be the case. Any belief in continued existence unperceived that it may prompt is therefore quite unintelligible to us simply as subject of that experience. Thus, in the sense explicit in my opening formulation of (OP), this version of the orthodox view fails to account for the status of our conscious perceptual experience as the source of our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of its ordinary physical objects. This completes my case for the (OV) account of (OP).

5 Conclusion

Over and above any epistemological benefits that the Object View may have in relation to our knowledge of the ordinary perceptible properties of things, I therefore conclude that it also has significant epistemological benefits over the orthodox view with respect to our understanding of the continued existence unperceived of the ordinary physical objects that we perceive.¹¹

Declarations

Competing interests I have no conflicts of interest.

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