Scepticism with Regard to the Senses

1. Hume’s Challenge to the Vulgar
…when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but representations of the other. This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it…

But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception. (Hume, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, sec. xii, pt. 1, pp.151 in Selby-Bigge)

What can we know in such a predicament? We can perhaps know what sensory experiences we are having, or how things seem to us to be…We are in a sense imprisoned within those representations, at least with respect to our knowledge…

This can seem to leave us in the position of finding a barrier between ourselves and the world around us. There would then be a veil of sensory experiences or sensory objects which we could not penetrate but which would be no reliable guide to the world beyond the veil. (Stroud, The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism, 1984), pp. 32-3.)

Does the puzzle about what sense experience can provide derive solely from the Cartesian sceptical predicament? Hume suggests not.

What is the force of Hume’s challenge to the vulgar?

There is a temptation to suppose that a perceptual relation to the object provides a necessary condition of thought about the object:

\[ x \text{ d-perceives } y \text{ iff } x \text{ stands, in virtue of } x \text{'s perceptual experience, in such a relation to } y \text{ that, if } x \text{ could make demonstrative judgements, then it would be possible for } x \text{ to make the true demonstrative judgement 'That is } y'. \]

(P.F. Snowdon, ‘How to Interpret “Direct Perception’”, p.56.)

G. E. Moore put the point succinctly when he said: ‘the prop. is not understood until the thing in question is seen.’ (Moore 1962: 158). You do not understand the demonstrative except by being conscious of the object; or rather, there is a distinctive way of understanding the demonstrative that is provided by your consciousness of the object. So there is a theoretical role to be played by the notion of consciousness of the object. It has to explain the ability to understand the demonstrative. (Campbell, Reference & Consciousness, p.25.)

The consequence of a pure subjectivism would be to deny that one is able to single out or refer to objects in the world around one.

3. An Alternative Construal of the Veil
…and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, this house and that tree, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. (Hume, op cit, 152.)

Were we able to rely on ‘the primary instincts of nature’ there would be a match between the judgements we make and what there is for us ‘to consider’.

Even if perceptual contact as evidenced in our vulgar conception of sense perception is not the only way of providing for reference to objects or for singling them out, it is a way by reference to which we understand how we are placed to single objects out and come to know about them.

Cf. Austin:

If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that’s a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn’t provide me with more evidence that it’s a pig, I can now just see that it is, the question is settled. (Austin, Sense & Sensibilia, p. 113.)
Contrast Moore:

I am not at all sceptical as to the truth of … propositions which assert the existence of material things: on the contrary, I hold that we all know, with certainty, many such propositions to be true. But I am sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct analysis of such propositions is…

…It seems to me quite evident that my knowledge that I am now perceiving a human hand is a deduction from a pair of propositions simpler still – propositions which I can only express in the form ‘I am perceiving this’ and ‘This is a human hand’. It is the analysis of propositions of the latter kind which seems to me to present such great difficulties, while nevertheless the whole question as to the nature of material thing obviously depends upon their analysis. (Moore, ‘A Defence of Common Sense’, Philosophical Papers, p.53. [1925])

4. Deflationary Conceptions of Knowledge of Sense-Experience

Why then should, or how then can, judgments about how things appear play a role in the evaluation of the reasons perception gives me for my beliefs?...

That this question should arise here signals that Evans has an explanatory commitment that McDowell does not have. The “challenge” is to discharge this commitment.

What we need to explain, to answer McDowell’s challenge, is how, even though my judgments about how things appear cannot even have the same kind of content as my perceptual states, I can yet be thinking about the reasons perception gives me for forming various beliefs… when I think about how things appear to me. (Heck, ‘Nonconceptual Content and “The Space of Reasons”’, Philosophical Review, 2000, p.514.)

…a subject can gain knowledge of his internal informational states in a very simple way: by re-using precisely those skills of conceptualization that he uses to make judgements about the world. Here is how he can do it. He goes through exactly the same procedure as he would go through if he were trying to make a judgement about how it is at this place now, but excluding knowledge he has of an extraneous kind. The result will necessarily be closely correlated with the content of the informational state which he is in at that time… (Evans, The Varieties of Reference, p.227.)

5. The Consequences for Pure Subjectivism

The judgements that I take to reflect how I am perceiving the world to be are distinct from the judgements that I make about how the world is – they offer an explanation of how I am in a position to make those judgements. My preparedness to make those judgements is undermined, if I am deprived of that explanation.

So, that my judgement about what is around me is threatened by the alternative description of my experience is evidence that the description I give is a description of my experience, and not just a re-formulation of my judgement about the environment.

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