

Representationalism

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Many theories of mind provide compelling explanations for the nature of perception, but the one that can accommodate both physicality of the brain while explaining phenomenal aspects like qualia is representationalism. Representationalism is the theory that we do not perceive objects directly, but we perceive the properties of objects. Properties are inherent qualities that characterize the state of an object, or “the way things might be” (Pautz, 104). If, for example, you see a guitar in front of you, what you perceive is the guitar’s properties of being brown and guitar-shaped, and these properties – not the guitar itself – are what gets represented in your mind. When a property is represented, the neurons in the brain are activated, but it is not the neurons themselves that cause an experience. It is the resulting product that the neurons produce that creates the experience, much like functionalism. When properties within the world are perceived in the mind, this gives you cognitive access to them. Cognitive access is the ability to think about properties independent of the objects themselves. That is, cognitive access is what gives you the ability to think about what the guitar looks like when it is not right in front of you.

Representationalism also provides the best explanation for phenomenal properties like qualia. Qualia are the subjective features of experience that describe how an experience feels to the experiencer. Qualia are things like colors, or tastes that are subjective to the person experiencing them, yet they are precisely what makes a certain experience have a certain character. It is difficult (if not impossible) to describe exactly what the color green is like, nevertheless, the color green is inside our minds when we see a green object, and it is integral to our experience of this object. Representationalism provides the best explanation for qualia by breaking them down into properties. If the color green is itself a property, and we can instantiate this property, then representationalism provides a clear definition to phenomenal properties which are not so easily

defined. It is because of the instantiation of qualia and the explanation of cognitive access that I find Representationalism the most compelling perceptual theory. This paper will start with a breakdown of the argument for representationalism, a response from a Sense Datum theorist, and it will end with two objections and responses to each objection.

Section I

Argument for Representationalism:

1. Representationalism is the relationship of a subject and the properties of an object
2. The object itself may or may not exist
3. Experience only consists in this relationship between a subject and the properties of an object
4. This relationship can be generalized to other types of experiences
5. Therefore, experience is the relationship between subjects and properties

Premise one can be defended by looking at unusual cases of perception, such as optical illusions. If we look at a video of a rushing waterfall, and the video suddenly stops and becomes a stationary image, we still perceive the waterfall moving, even if we know it is not. We are standing in a relationship to the properties of the video, the property of movement, and the property of appearing waterfall-like. Although the image does not move, what we are representing is the property of movement from the video. In the same way, when we perceive the real world, we are not perceiving what is directly in front of us, but we are perceiving the world indirectly, through its properties.

Representationalism also relies on the concept of existence-neutrality to explain hallucinations. When a person has a perceptual experience – whether real or hallucinatory - they are

experiencing the properties of objects and representing them. The properties themselves do not have to exist in order to have an experience in the same way an image doesn't have to exist to a person hallucinating for it to feel real. The underlying brain process is the same. The properties are neutral because it does not matter whether or not they exist. Unlike Sense Datum theory, which asserts that the object must exist, existence-neutrality eliminates the need to explain the properties one experiences in a hallucination that do not exist in the real world.

Representationalism allows you to think abstractly about objects that may or may not exist in the real world. If you think about a cat, you can think about the property of having whiskers, or the property of moving like a cat in general terms. It is not necessary to conjure up an image of a particular cat, because there exists in your mind the category of things that have cat-like qualities. Similarly, you can have categories of things that do not exist, like dragons, but the properties allow you to have cognitive access to them despite their inexistence. This is called perceptual imprecision (Pautz, 112). The mind has the ability to form prototypes and categorize objects to organize the massive inputs of information that is absorbed every day.

Representationalism provides a clear explanation of how this organization takes place.

Once we accept the first two premises, it becomes easy to see that experience itself is simply the relationship between subjects and properties of objects, nothing else. If properties rather than objects are what is being represented in the cases of illusion and hallucination, then it is reasonable to infer that this is what is going on in everyday experiences too. Similarly, Representationalism can be generalized to other forms of perception, like sound. If we play our guitar, what we perceive is the properties of wavelengths and the property of sounding like a guitar. Following this, we can conclude that all experiences consist of the relationship between

subjects and the properties of objects, and what is represented are the properties, not the objects themselves.

One might argue against the second premise. When one is experiencing a property, this property must exist, otherwise how can you experience it? The Sense Datum theorist might jump in and argue that their theory accommodates complex thinking through mental images, and that existence-dependence offers a more concrete explanation. Existence-dependence is the claim that the existence of a mental image in one's brain is dependent on the actual existence of that object outside of the brain. The Sense Datum theorist would say that when a subject perceives an object, the mind does not perceive this object directly, but rather the object appears in a kind of mental space, and this mental object is what the brain perceives. Sensory input from the world is the "data" that lives in this mental space separating the real world and the mind. Essentially, this mental space is a mediator between the object and the subject's perception of it. Sense Datum theorists argue that this mental space allows a person to think abstractly about objects in a more concrete way than through cognitive access of properties.

While it is true that both Sense Datum theorists and Representationalists think about objects indirectly, Sense Datum theory does not provide a satisfactory explanation of perception with a foundation in physicalism. When perceiving the guitar, the Sense Datum theorist would say that the guitar does not physically exist in the world or in the mind, but it must exist as sense data in this mental space that separates the two spaces. If the object only exists in this nonphysical realm, we must believe that such a realm exists, and we begin to step away from being grounded in the real world and start to move toward more obscure theories like Dualism.

Section II

One objection that representationalism faces is the Gestalt switch objection, which I will describe here. There is a well-known image that appears to be both a rabbit and a duck. The bill of the duck can be seen as the ears of the rabbit depending on how you look at it. Once you know that the same image contains two different animals, it becomes possible to shift between the two perspectives and see both animals depending on what you choose to see. The ability to see one object two different ways is called the Gestalt switch. If objects have inherent properties that are represented in the mind, how can representationalism explain the apparent shift in experience?

A shift like this could be explained simply, though obscurely, by saying that at first, there was a property of being rabbit-like, then there was a property of being duck-like. However, this is a strange explanation, and Pautz provides a better one; gravity (Pautz, 120).

According to Pautz, our natural perception of the world is aligned with gravity, and gravity organizes our perception. In the case of the rabbit-duck image, at first, we may see the duck, because the duck's bill is straight with the horizon line of the image. When we see the rabbit, our perception is altered slightly against our normal perception of gravity because the rabbit is looking upwards rather than forwards. If we understand our perception through its foundation in gravity, it is easy to see how we can shift from normal perception, which aligns with gravity, and an apparent abnormal perception, which does not align with gravity.

A second objection to representationalism, and perhaps more interesting, is the concept of instantiation. Representationalism argues that properties give cognitive access to them and allows one to think about the way things might be like. However, without experiencing these properties first-hand inside objects in the world, there seems to be no way to gain cognitive

access outside of language which provides solely an explanation sans a real experience. One might argue that external directedness is the only method for providing cognitive access. External directedness is the idea that when one perceives an object, this object can only be accessed from outside of your mind. Representationalism also claims that hallucination provides cognitive access to nonexistent properties, which seems counterintuitive to how we learn about and understand things in the world.

One answer to this objection is that hallucination accounts for perceptual imprecision. We have the natural capacity to organize and generalize objects, even unfamiliar ones. The brain has the remarkable ability to judge the relationship between things that are unfamiliar with things that are recognizable and can connect what is similar. Because we are naturally inclined to learn, we learn to predict things for future benefit.

Conclusion

The main accomplishment of this paper is to provide an explanation for representationalism and to give reasons why it is an attractive argument for perception because it describes a potential framework in support of the existence of qualia, and explains cognitive access, illusions and hallucinations in a way that does not neglect physicalism. I responded to the Sense Datum theorist's potential response to existence-neutrality by proving that hallucinations provide cognitive access, and I also responded to the Gestalt switch objection, and the objection of cognitive access without external directedness. While each theory of perception provides an interesting explanation of how we see the world, it is my belief that Representationalism is the theory that combines the best elements from each theory into a comprehensible view that can aligns with physicalism while accommodating phenomenal features like qualia.

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