

Getting Properties in Mind

Dominic Alford-Duguid

Perceiving a property—a colour, shape, or size—can permit us to think about it. For example, upon seeing a red round ball, you could think *that is red* or *it's that shape*. Yet philosophers devote less attention to perception-based thought about properties than to perception-based thought about objects like tables and chairs. As a result, few recognise how a right account of perception-based thought about properties has surprising (and sometimes shocking) consequences for perception and thought.

My dissertation uncovers some of these consequences. I establish claims about perception-based thought about properties—about when it occurs, how it occurs, and why it matters. I then use these claims to argue for a series of controversial theses about perception and thought.

The first thesis concerns perceptual illusion. It is an old observation that when thinking about objects on the basis of perception, a subject can make mistakes about an object's features without losing her ability to think about the object. What few realise is that perception-based thought about properties is similarly tolerant of error. I argue that this tolerance should lead us to reject a view of perceptual illusion that has become pervasive. This view holds that just as we lie to others by saying something false, illusory experience misleads by misrepresenting how things stand in the world. Many accounts of perception carry commitment to this view of illusion. As a result, my argument also extends to undermine these accounts, and thus motivates the search for a radical alternative account of perception.

A second thesis concerns the structure of thought. During his Logical Atomist phase, Russell argued that our capacity for descriptive identification of objects (e.g. that the nearest ball is round) depends upon our capacity for perceptual demonstrative thought about objects. I develop a powerful argument for a parallel view for thought about properties: PREDICATIVE ATOMISM. The view is a version of the old empiricist claim that to think about unobservable properties (such as spin or charge), a subject must be able to think perception-based thoughts about observable properties (such as red or circular). My argument exploits a deep but neglected connection between our grasp of causation and perception-based thought about properties.

A third thesis concerns the qualitative character of perceptual experience. I first extend my argument for PREDICATIVE ATOMISM in order to derive a claim about perception, namely that we have a special kind of perceptual contact with observable properties. I then show that this perceptual contact requires a version of PHENOMENAL EXTERNALISM: the qualitative character of perceptual experience constitutively depends upon observable properties instantiated in the perceived scene.

My final thesis concerns the limits of aboutness. I resurrect a neglected but powerful challenge from Dummett (1973). The challenge undermines the widespread assumption that ascribing a property—thinking, of an object, that it is F (e.g. thinking *that table is tall* or *Jason is short*)—constitutes a way of thinking about the property. Unfortunately Dummett's original challenge has a number of problems, many inherited from his verificationism. To avoid these problems, I develop a non-verificationist version of the challenge that is both more general and more powerful than the original. Faced with my new and improved challenge, we must earn our right to the assumption that ascribing a property is a way of thinking about it. I take the first step: using resources developed earlier in the dissertation, I solve my refined challenge for the special case of perception-based ascription of observable properties.