

PHL340 Handout 11: Attention and Thought

§1 Background: Perceptual Demonstrative Thought

In 'Berkeley's Puzzle' Campbell exploited a link between our capacity to think about objects on the basis of perception and our capacity to treat these objects as mind-independent:

Mind-Independence: a subject counts as thinking about an ordinary object only if she treats the object as mind-independent.

The most important way of thinking about ordinary objects, for Campbell's purposes, consists in thinking what philosophers call a 'perceptual demonstrative thought'.

These are thoughts a subject cannot think without some perceptual contact with the object the thought is about, and which we standardly express with sentences such as 'that is red' or 'that is tall'.

Philosophers often contrast perceptual demonstrative thought with so-called 'descriptive thought'. Descriptive thoughts are those that (a) a subject can think only if she grasps one or more descriptions (e.g. 'the man drinking a martini in the corner'), where (b) the thought is about whichever object satisfies these descriptions.

Example: to think the thought one might express with the sentence 'The author of *Waverley* was Scottish', I must not only understand the definite description 'The author of *Waverley*' (which in turn requires understanding 'author' and '*Waverley*' and so on), but my thought will be about whichever person actually wrote *Waverley* (namely Sir Walter Scott).

Perceptual demonstrative thoughts also contrast with thoughts made available by a subject's grasp of a proper name like 'Sakina'. If I understand the name, I do not require perceptual contact with the object the name stands for in order to think thoughts I would express with sentences such as 'Sakina is late' or 'Sakina is tall'.

Note: while neither descriptive nor proper name based thoughts require perceptual contact with the object the thought is about, philosophers disagree over how similar these two types of thought turn out to be. Descriptivists, for instance, think that proper name based thoughts are a type of descriptive thought (and so think that a subject can think a proper name based thought only if she grasps a description, or cluster of descriptions, uniquely satisfied by the object the name stands for).

Returning to Campbell, the minimal version of *Mind-Independence* is the following:

*Mind-Independence**: a subject counts as thinking a perceptual demonstrative thought about an ordinary object only if she treats the object as mind-independent.

Now this claim belongs to a cluster of potential theses about necessary conditions for successful perceptual demonstrative thought about an object. Today we're going to look at several accounts of what it takes for a perceptual demonstrative thought to be about a particular ordinary object.

These accounts offer full or partial answers to what we'll call the *Aboutness-Fixing Question*: what is it for a perceptual demonstrative thought (one we might express with a sentence such as 'that is red' or 'that is tall') to be about whichever object the thought is genuinely about?

Note: it seems relatively straightforward to answer the parallel question for descriptive thought. A descriptive thought of the form 'The F is G' is about an object o if and only if o is the unique satisfier of the description 'The F'. Indeed, the apparent straightforwardness of this answer motivated many descriptivists to treat proper name based thought (and in some cases even perceptual demonstrative thought) as a subspecies of descriptive thought.

The accounts we'll breeze through belong to John Campbell, Declan Smithies, and Imogen Dickie. Our focus will be on how a right account of perceptual demonstrative thought can have substantial implications for our account of perceptual experience, and in particular our account of the significance of conscious experience.

§2 Aboutness-Fixing For Perceptual Demonstrative Thought

Campbell, Smithies, and Dickie agree over the general shape that a right answer to the aboutness-fixing question.

In particular, all three accept what we'll call *Russell's Thesis*:

Russell's Thesis: A subject's perceptual demonstrative thought is about a particular object only if she perceptually attends to that object.

Given their acceptance of *Russell's Thesis*, all three of our authors agree that a complete answer to the aboutness-fixing question for perceptual demonstrative thought must also explain why it is that perceptual demonstrative thought requires perceptual attention to the object the thought is about.

As I briefly noted last lecture, Mole (2011) provides an argument against the general connection *Russell's Thesis* forges between perceptual demonstrative thought and perceptual attention. He thinks that a right explanation of attention to an object must appeal to facts about our capacity to think about such objects, and so we cannot explain the latter capacity in terms of perceptual attention to objects (unless we wish to embrace an unacceptable form of explanatory circularity).

Note: Mole's argument doesn't have force against Dickie's view (a point he notes in his entry on attention in the Stanford Encyclopedia

of Philosophy). There are hard questions about whether his argument has force against Campbell or Smithies.

We're less concerned with the details of their particular answers to the aboutness-fixing question, and more concerned with what these answers lead them to say about the role of perceptual attention.

In particular, all three theorists take the controversial stance that the perceptual attention which underwrites perceptual demonstrative thought must be *conscious*. Yet they offer quite different explanations for why a subject must consciously attend to the object her perceptual demonstrative thought is about.

§3 Three Roles for Consciousness

Campbell and Smithies share a general account of how aboutness-fixing works for perceptual demonstrative thought (cf. p. 19 of Smithies). Furthermore, both assume that the role of consciousness consists in securing justification for reasoning whose deployment is characteristic of grasp of a perceptual demonstrative thought about an object.

What they disagree over is the role of consciousness in securing the required justification. As we saw when we discussed Berkeley's Puzzle, Campbell thinks that the role of consciousness lies in determining a target object, an object which in turn sets standards of good order for inferences concerning the object:

Campbell: In presenting a subject with an ordinary object, conscious perceptual attention provides (a) knowledge of an object, and in providing this knowledge, the attention (b) enables the object to determine standards of 'good order' or 'correctness' for inferences concerning the object.

Smithies argues against this assignment of a *target-setting role* to consciousness (as does Dickie: see p. 314 of her paper, and §1 of Smithies's paper). Smithies thinks it is characteristic of our capacity for perceptual demonstrative thought that a subject can think such a thought about an object only if she can form immediately justified beliefs about the object. He argues that the role of conscious attention is to provide access to the justification necessary to immediately justify these beliefs:

Smithies: In presenting a subject with an ordinary object, conscious perceptual attention provides access to *propositional justification* that enables the subject to form immediately justified beliefs about the object.

Notice that this role for conscious perceptual attention depends on Smithies's argument in the last paper of his we read. Recall that he believes (a) the functional role of attention is to make information rationally accessible to a subject (i.e. it enables information to serve as propositional justification for a subject's beliefs and actions), and (b) that attention can perform this role only if it is a mode of consciousness.

One way to put the distinction between Smithies and Campbell would be to say that while Campbell thinks conscious attention plays a target-setting role, Smithies thinks conscious attention provides *theoretical justification* for our beliefs.

Note: I'm fairly sure that Campbell isn't a major fan of the divide between propositional and doxastic justification, in part because the notion of propositional justification threatens to introduce an implausible degree of idealization into the conditions under which a subject counts as forming a justified belief.

The level of idealization will depend upon how tightly we connect doxastic and propositional justification.

For example, if propositional justification could be present even if no subject, short of an omniscient being, could form a belief on the basis of that justification (and so turn mere propositional justification into doxastic justification for her belief), then propositional justification seems capable of a troubling level of epistemic *irrelevance*.

In contrast, if propositional justification is strongly constrained by what a normal subject—one with limited cognitive, epistemic, and practical resources—could believe, it may not be able to do the sort of theoretical work that Smithies and his allies (e.g. Pryor) otherwise need it to do.

Upshot: there are hard questions about just how to draw the distinction in order that it can perform both its general theoretical role in an account of justification and its particular role in Smithies's account of the connection between perceptual demonstrative thought, perceptual attention, and consciousness.

Dickie's account of perceptual demonstrative thought differs in fairly radical ways from the accounts of Campbell and Smithies. She argues that it isn't the role of perceptual attention to directly provide perceptual justification (*contra* Smithies), or to set an object as a target that determines standards of good order for belief-formation (*contra* Campbell).

Instead, she thinks the role of perceptual attention is to provide a generally reliable basis for the formation of beliefs about an attended ordinary object (i.e. beliefs formed on the basis of an attentional link will tend to get the attended object's observable properties right if it is an ordinary object). Her argument for this conclusion rests partly on empirical results concerning the relationship between our ability to attend to something which seems to be an object (in technical terms, a so-called 'visual object') and intuitive constraints on the behaviour of ordinary objects.

Note: Dickie's argument here strongly mirrors part of O'Callaghan's argument for the claim that sounds are event-like individuals. Both start with claims about how entities belonging to a particular metaphysical category typically behave (e.g. how they persist through time, the kind of internal unity they exhibit, etc.). They then pair these claims with facts about perception (in O'Callaghan's case, facts about auditory experience of sounds; in Dickie's case, facts about when attention successfully tracks a visual object) to argue for a claim about perception of entities belonging to the metaphysical category (in O'Callaghan's case, that sounds are event-like individuals; in Dickie's case, that the beliefs formed in response to an attentional link tend

to get the attended object's properties right if the object is an ordinary object). This shared style of argument forms part of what Strawson (1959) called 'descriptive metaphysics'.

Justification for beliefs formed on the basis of attention is indirectly made possible by the reliability of this sort of process of attention-based belief-formation. Dickie argues that a perceptual demonstrative thought is about an object only if the beliefs a subject forms in response to the attentional link tend to get the object's properties right (note: this is part of her answer to the aboutness-fixing question). Forming beliefs in this way, in response to an attentional link, is therefore a means to achieving the **goal** of representing an object in thought.

Dickie makes the perhaps surprising claim that along with hunger and other basic needs (e.g. Aristotle thinks we have a basic need to know), the mind has a basic need to represent things outside itself. This basic need determines a goal: the representation of things outside oneself. It then selects the formation of beliefs in response to an attentional link as a non-lucky means to the satisfaction of this goal.

Because the formation of beliefs in this way is a means to the satisfaction of the goal—and doesn't satisfy this goal merely through luck—Dickie thinks these beliefs are justified (cf. p. 310)

Dickie's model for justification comes from a famous account of *practical justification* – justification on the basis of *intention*. The model was initially developed in gnomic fashion by G. E. M. Anscombe in her book *Intention*, and later elaborated by J. David Velleman.

To see the connection, consider an example Dickie provides:

'Robin Hood intends to shoot a willow wand stuck into the ground 200 yards away. Robin's skills are such that he is easily able to hit this kind of target at this kind of distance unless conditions are abnormally windy. He takes careful aim and fires... A right account [of what justifies Robin's aiming and firing the way he does] must connect whatever justification Robin has with the facts that he intends to hit the target, and that, given his skill, he would be unlucky to fail in this intention and not merely lucky to succeed. Here is one plausible proposal:

- i. Robin intends to hit the willow wand.
- ii. Because Robin is a skilled archer, this intention selects (causes in an appropriate way) activation of a means of implementation that is a reliable generator of its fulfillment
- iii. Robin's aiming and firing the way he does are justified because the yare non-luckily selected non-lucky generators of fulfillment of his intention (so he will be unlucky to fail and not merely lucky to succeed).⁷ (p. 308)

What is the role for consciousness? She thinks the selection of this kind of belief formation process by our basic need to represent requires that the

attentional link be conscious (cf. p. 313). This is a claim she elaborates and defends in her forthcoming book.

§4 Implications for Perceptual Experience

We saw Campbell arguing that only direct realism can accommodate the explanatory role of perceptual experience.

He claims that only direct realism could both (a) enable conscious perceptual attention to play the target-setting role that his justificatory story requires (unlike indirect realism, for instance) and (b) respect the demand, introduced by the explanatory role of perceptual experience, for perceptual experience to present objects and their properties in a manner that differs in kind from the manner of representation characteristic of thought.

There are nice and hard questions about how much of this argument survives if we replace Campbell's target-setting account of the significance of conscious perceptual attention with either Smithies's 'propositional justification' account or Dickie's 'basic need' account.

§4.1 Justification and Direct Realism

One issue that separates these accounts concerns a subject's justificatory position when undergoing a hallucinatory perceptual experience. Campbell's justificatory story for perceptual demonstrative thought does not apply when a subject fails to perceptually attend to an ordinary object (e.g. the subject hallucinates the object). So if I undergo a hallucinatory experience as of a leprechaun running into the room, Campbell would insist that none of the beliefs I form after directing my attention toward the leprechaun count as justified.

Smithies's account, by contrast, does not obviously require the existence of an object at the other end of the attentional link. Hallucinatory experience might nevertheless involve the uptake of information through an attentional link (albeit a link without an object at the other end), and nothing in his account prevents this information from serving as propositional justification for beliefs formed on the basis of the (hallucinatory) attentional link.

Finally, Dickie designs her account to accommodate cases where we seem to have a perceptual link with an object, but no ordinary object is in fact present. In these cases our beliefs are justified in virtue of being part of a process of belief formation – the ordinary process by which we form beliefs in response to an open attentional link – that our basic need to represent non-luckily selects as a non-lucky means to its own fulfillment. So while our perceptual demonstrative thoughts in these object-less cases fail to be about an object, and so count as 'empty' perceptual demonstrative thoughts, the beliefs we form in these cases are nevertheless justified.

Recall that a major argument for representationalism, and against direct realism, starts from the claim that introspectively indiscriminable veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences provide the same justification for beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences.

Campbell's view entails that this starting claim is false. So someone who launches this kind of argument against his brand of direct realism risk begging the question.

Smithies and Dickie can accommodate the starting claim, and so to that extent their views are representationalist-friendly (and potentially direct-realist-unfriendly).

Whether Smithies's view ultimately coheres with standard representationalist commitments will depend upon what he says about the conditions under which perceptual experience makes information available to serve as propositional justification.

- If introspectively indiscriminable veridical and hallucinatory experiences make the same information available, his account jives with representationalism. Going this route would likely force Smithies to deny a claim that Siegel argues for elsewhere using her phenomenal contrast method, namely that particular objects are represented in perceptual experience (and so fail to be represented in hallucinatory experience).
- If the availability of the information depends on the existence of a perceived object, Smithies will be stuck saying the same thing about hallucinatory experience as Campbell, namely that these experiences fail to justify beliefs formed on the basis of an open attentional link.

We'll see in the next subsection that Dickie's view runs afoul of representationalism for other reasons.

§4.2 Direct Realism and the Satisfaction of a Basic Need to Represent

Representationalists have a standard response to Campbell's charge that they fail to respect the demand (a demand which derives from the explanatory role of perceptual experience) for perceptual experience to present the world in a fashion that is different in kind from the representation characteristic of thought. They argue as follows:

1. The demand would be satisfied if representationalists could find some suitably deep difference in kind between the representation characteristic of perception and the representation characteristic of thought.
2. There exists such a deep difference in kind
 - a. Representationalists usually point to a distinction that goes back to Gareth Evans (1982) between conceptual and nonconceptual content. The rough idea is that a subject can undergo a perceptual experience with a certain representational content, yet lack the conceptual sophistication that would be necessary to entertain such content (or a suitably related content) in thought – this content therefore counts as *nonconceptual*. In contrast, one cannot entertain a thought with a given representational content without exploiting a certain level of conceptual sophistication – the content is *conceptual*. So the proposal would be that the representation characteristic of perceptual experience is special in virtue of being *nonconceptual*.
3. So respecting the explanatory role of perceptual experience does not require denying that perceptual experience presents external world objects and properties in virtue of representing these entities. [From 1 and 2]

Dickie's account provides the seeds of a better version of Campbell's argument for direct realism. She sketches this argument in her forthcoming book (pp. 148-150). It runs roughly as follows:

1. The formation of perceptual demonstrative beliefs is motivated by our mind's basic need to represent things in the manner characteristic of thought
2. Since we're motivated to form perceptual demonstrative beliefs in response to perceptual experience, it cannot be the case that perceptual experience already satisfies the need that motivates our formation of perceptual demonstrative beliefs.
3. So perceptual experience cannot generally involve the sort of representation that is characteristic of thought. [from 1 and 2]

Unlike Campbell's argument, which begins with the nature of thought and then insists that perceptual experience must involve a presentation of the external world more fundamental than the representation characteristic of thought, Dickie's argument challenges representationalists to explain why perceptual experience isn't sufficient to satisfy the mind's basic need to represent things in the manner characteristic of thought.

To invoke the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content isn't yet to answer this challenge, since the distinction doesn't alone explain why nonconceptual representational content would fail to satisfy the mind's basic need to represent.