

Main Theses of Naïve Realism and Consequences for Skepticism

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Does our perception provide us with direct access to the world? Can we truly perceive objects and their properties as they genuinely are? Or do we only perceive appearances of external objects? These questions are among the fundamental questions of philosophy, and different philosophical approaches can be distinguished based on their responses to them. Naïve realism is an approach that has emerged in response to these questions and holds a significant position in contemporary philosophy. In this article, we will review the core principles of naïve realism. Additionally, we will attempt to demonstrate how these principles block the main argument of skepticism about our perceptual beliefs.

Main Theses

The starting point of naïve realism is quite simple. Naïve realists believe that there is an external world made up of material objects that exist independently of our minds, and we can perceive these objects, including their color, shape, and other properties, through our sensory organs. According to naïve realists, our perception allows us to directly perceive the world as it is, and therefore, the beliefs obtained through perception are justified.

Indeed, one does not need to be a trained philosopher to understand these ideas. Most of us can easily arrive at them based on everyday life examples. For instance, when we look at a white piece of paper on a table, most of us believe that it exists in external space, outside of our minds, and that it is distinct from objects in dreams in that respect. Even if we turn our faces away or leave the room, the white paper will

retain its existence and properties, such as its whiteness and rectangular shape – that is to say that the existence of the paper or its properties is not dependent on our minds. We also believe that by looking at the paper, we can know its color and shape, and if there is no problem with our vision, our beliefs formed by looking at the paper, such as the paper is white or the paper is rectangular, will be justified. Thus, based on the above discussion, we can say that naïve realism closely aligns with common sense.

Nonetheless, it's crucial to keep in mind that various examples from everyday life demonstrate how our perception can deceive us. Illusions and hallucinations are typical examples of such deceptions. Based on these types of examples, many philosophers conclude that our perception does not provide us with direct access to the external world because, even if there is an external world outside of our minds, we connect with it through potentially deceptive appearances; and for this reason, the beliefs derived from our perception may not be justified, which allows for skepticism.

Unlike common sense, naïve realism primarily emerged as a reaction to these philosophical problems; it formulates its theses and arguments based on responding to the philosophical problems of perception. Naïve realists believe that if we claim that there are no intermediaries, such as appearances that can be deceptive, between our minds and objects, meaning that our minds have direct access to objects, then we can overcome the epistemic problems of perception and defeat the arguments of skeptics.

We can summarize the central theses of naïve realism as follows:

Thesis 1: Perceptual experiences present external objects directly.

Thesis 2: An illusory/hallucinatory experience has a distinct phenomenological quality compared to its corresponding

veridical experience.

Let's first try to understand Thesis 1 in more detail, and then focus on Thesis 2.

Direct Perception or Explanation of Thesis 1

As subjects perceiving the world, we engage with it through various mental states such as beliefs, memories, imagination, desires, etc. One of the primary distinct features of perception as a mental state or experience is that it directly connects the subject to external objects – at least in comparison to other types of mental states – because during the act of perception, the perceived object is present before the subject. To understand this, let's compare perception with another type of experience: memory. We know that to remember an object or event, it does not have to be directly present in front of the subject (naturally if we are talking about the visual mode of perception). For example, you don't need to see your computer physically to recall it; you can recall it when you're in another room without the computer, even with your eyes closed. However, to perceive or see the computer, it must be directly present in your field of vision. In other words, while the act of remembering involves an indirect connection between you and the imagined object (in this case, the computer), the indirectness disappears during the experience of perception – that is, during perceptual experiences, external objects are directly presented to our minds.

It's important to note that not all theories explaining perception agree with the idea that the indirect connection with objects disappears during perception. For example, according to the sense-data theory, even when the perceived object is in front of the subject during the perceptual experience, the subject still engages with objects through sense-data (or appearances). For instance, the sense-data theory suggests that when we see a white ball, its appearance or corresponding sense-data plays an intermediary role between

us and the ball itself during perception. Also, according to this theory, there is no absolute need for the white ball itself to participate in the field of vision for the sense-data to constitute a visual experience, for there may be situations where we have the same visual experience without the white ball being present (for example, hallucinations). Naïve realists, on the other hand, argue that there is no need for any intermediary like sense-data (or if we are talking about the theory of intentionality, intentional content) between the subject and the object during perception. In other words, naïve realists do not see the need to explain perception with intermediaries like appearances or sense-data, which represent the world in the subject's mind; because – as strange as it may sound – naïve realists believe that during perception, perceptual experiences are partly constituted by the relevant properties of the object perceived. To illustrate with the same example, when we see a white ball, the visual experience is partly constituted by the ball's whiteness. That is, the relevant property of the object itself directly participates in the perception. In this regard, perception, in fact, according to naïve realists, must be a direct awareness of certain aspects or properties of the world; being in the process of perception for a subject means directly engaging with the world in this way.

The difference in phenomenological quality between the bad and the corresponding good case, or the explanation of Thesis 2

Thesis 2 refers to illusions and hallucinations, emphasizing that the latter have a different phenomenological quality compared to the corresponding veridical experiences. By phenomenological quality, we mean the what-it-is-likeness of experience. For example, when we eat an apple, we have a particular taste experience that is different from the taste experience of a pear. Or when we see a red ball, we have a specific visual experience that is different from the visual experience of a white ball. In other words, all these experiences have different phenomenological qualities – they

are not the same type of experience.

Although it may sound strange, naïve realists also think the same about an illusion/hallucination (henceforth referred to as bad cases) and a corresponding veridical experience (henceforth referred to as good cases). For example, they believe that seeing a white ball (a good case) and experiencing a hallucination of a white ball (a bad case) are different types of experiences with different phenomenological qualities, even though the subject might regard both as the same kind of experience.

We can consider Thesis 2 as a continuation of Thesis 1. Thesis 1 states that in a good case, the object is directly perceived or partially constitutes the perception, which does not apply to bad cases like hallucinations. Thesis 2 extends this difference to the phenomenological level, noting that the partial participation of the object or its features in the perceptual experience in a good case also affects its phenomenological quality; in the latter case, the experience acquires a quality that is different from the corresponding bad case.

Note that, in fact, this view is contrary to the skepticism-prone traditional view. According to this traditional view, a bad case and its corresponding good case have the same phenomenological quality. However, for naïve realists, despite the subject's inability to distinguish between them, seeing a white ball and experiencing a hallucination about a white ball are distinct types of experiences. When we see the white ball, the ball itself partially participates in forming the visual experience, and we directly perceive it; however, this is not the case in the corresponding hallucination. Therefore, even if the subject is not aware of it, the experience of seeing a white ball and having a hallucination about it have different phenomenological qualities.

Naïve realism as a response to skepticism

The importance of the main theses of naïve realism mentioned above lies in the fact that, if true, they block the possible skeptical conclusion. To briefly recap, skeptics argue that there is no good basis for the beliefs we form based on perception because they often deceive us (recall bad cases), and we are usually unaware of it. Moreover, what is presented to us in good cases is not reality but potentially deceptive appearances. Consequently, we perceive appearances and lack direct access to the true nature of reality. From this, it follows that there is no good basis for our beliefs about reality formed based on perception, or there is reason to approach their truth with doubt.

This skeptical conclusion is based on the phenomenological equating of bad cases and good cases. Because when we equate bad and corresponding good cases phenomenologically, it suggests that the same explanation should apply to both cases. Providing the same explanation for both cases implies that if the external object is not directly presented in the bad case, it cannot be directly presented to the subject in the good case either; in the good case, the subject directly perceives not the object, but the appearances. As mentioned earlier, claiming that we perceive appearances instead of objects is a foothold for skepticism because appearances often deceive us, and most of the time we are not aware of the deception. In other words, even when considering good cases, we cannot confidently assert that our beliefs about the world are well-founded.

When we do not equate bad and corresponding good cases phenomenologically – as Thesis 2 points out – the path to the skeptical conclusion is blocked because the phenomenological difference requires a different explanation. Based on that different explanation, even if we are mistaken in bad cases, in good cases – recall Thesis 1 – we are directly connected to the world in the sense that the perceived object partially constitutes the perception. The directness or partial constitution of the object in the perceptual experience

implies that the beliefs we form based on perception are also reliable. For example, when we see a white ball, our belief that the ball is white is well-founded because the ball itself partially participates in our perception, meaning the object is given to perception without appearances, and the belief directly arises from the perception.

Thus, unlike sense-data theories and other similar theories, according to naïve realism, it is incorrect to assume the object is never directly presented to the subject; the subject directly perceives the object, at least in a good case. From this, it follows that our beliefs about external objects formed based on perception are reliable because the good cases as their grounds are reliable, and there is no foothold for skepticism in this regard.

In our subsequent articles, we will also examine the problems naïve realism faces.