

Knowledge

Objective Knowledge for Subjective Beings

Appearance and Reality



A 'Superior Image' taken from the shore near Falmouth, Cornwall
BBC meteorologist David Braine said the superior mirage occurred because of 'special atmospheric conditions that bend light'—one involving a thermal inversion.

Is Objective Knowledge Possible?

- * One might think not: *being known* is always *being known by someone*
 - * So, one might think, the property of *being known* is forever, even trivially, constituted by the activities of some subject in some intentional or affective state.
- * Further, one might suppose, in a broadly Kantian vein, we cannot apprehend the world as it is in itself, but only as mediated by our conceptual scheme.
 - * So, one might conclude, we can know the world only as it appears to us, which is to say, then, as subjectively represented by ourselves to ourselves.

In Nagel's Terms

- * '... the pursuit of objective knowledge, whose aim is naturally described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it. Since it is impossible to leave one's own point of view behind entirely without ceasing to exist, the metaphor of getting outside ourselves must have another meaning. . . This is an old problem. The same ideas that make the pursuit of objectivity seem necessary for knowledge made both objectivity and knowledge seem, on reflection, unattainable.' (VN, 67)
- * This is why objectivity and scepticism spring from the same source: we want to know the world as it is independently of our interaction with it, but to seek to know the world as it is in itself *is* to interact with it.

An Old Problem

- * Democritus (*fl.* 460 BC): ‘by convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void’ (DK 68 B9)
- * Democritus: ‘by this doctrine we are cut off from the real’

Three Responses

- * Scepticism: There is an unclosable, uncrossable gap between the world as it appears (the ‘manifest image of the world’) and some world lying behind that image.
- * Reductivism: We close the gap by directing our gaze to the world as it appears, restricting our theorizing to the texture of our own mental states, or, if we are bold, to the limits of any possible mental states or conceptual schemata.
- * Heroism: We leap the gap, breaking out of our appearances and grasping the world as it is in itself.
 - * Here, says Nagel (*VN*, 69), ‘The chasm below is littered with epistemological corpses.’
 - * A possible fourth response, associated by Nagel with G. E. Moore (*VN*, 69 n. 1): one can also simply ‘turn one’s back on the abyss and announce that one is now on the other side.’

The Other Side of the Gap

* Consider Moore:

- * Sceptical strategies tend to take the following general form: (i) If S doesn't know that not- q (where q is some sceptical possibility), then S doesn't know that p ; (ii) S doesn't know that not- q ; (iii) Therefore, S doesn't know that p .
- * Moore: (i) Here is a hand; (ii) Here is another hand; (iii) [If (i) and (ii),] two external objects exist; (iv) Therefore, there is an external world.

Self-Transcendence

* Four desiderata:

1) Explain what the world is like

2) Explain what we are like

3) Explain why the world appears to us both as it is and as it isn't (cf. our 'Superior Image')

4) Explain how it is that we arrive at such a conception

* 'What we want is to reach a position as independent as possible of who we are and where we started, but a position that can also explain how we got there.' —*Nagel* (VN, 74)

The Case of Primary and Secondary Qualities

- * Three Topics:
 - * Naive Realism
 - * An Argument Against
 - * An Advance?

Naive Realism

- * We mainly begin as naive realists about perception.
 - * Two plausible assumptions about perception:
 - * Perceptual qualities are intrinsic, monadic properties of objects in our perceptual environments.
 - * Perceptual objects are perceived directly, rather than indirectly.
 - * If I see a blue sea before me, then I do not manage to do so by seeing my image of a blue sea and then, based upon this perception of an internal blue object, infer that the sea before me is blue.

The Variability of Perception

1. If S_1 perceives some object o to be ϕ and S_2 perceives the same o to be not- ϕ , where ϕ is a random perceptual quality, then o is neither ϕ nor not- ϕ *in itself*.
2. It often happens in perception that S_1 perceives o to be ϕ while S_2 perceives o to be not- ϕ .
3. Hence, for any random perceptual quality ϕ , no object o is either ϕ or not- ϕ in itself.

Why (1)?

- ❖ There seem to be only four possibilities, on the assumption of naive realism:
 1. If NR, then either (a) S_1 is wrong and S_2 is right; (b) S_1 is right and S_2 is wrong; (c) they're both right; (d) they're both wrong.
 2. Not: (1a), (1b), (1c), (1d).
 3. So, not NR
- ❖ In sum, given the variability of perception, naive realism must be false.

What to make of this?

- * Once we appreciate that primary qualities explain the variability of perception, ‘It is then a short step to the conjecture that the appearances of secondary qualities are caused by other primary qualities of objects, which we can then try to discover.’ —*Nagel (VN, 76)*
- * Here we ascend to a new level ‘from which we can understand and criticize the general forms of previous perspectives.’ —*Nagel (VN, 77)*
- * ‘The hope is to develop a detached perspective that can coexist with and comprehend the individual one.’ —*Nagel (VN, 86)*