

Philosophy of Mind A Short Introduction by Edward Feser

Perception

Dreaming, vivid hallucination & *The Matrix*?

Rene Descartes ... lays the foundation for scientific knowledge and reveals the true nature of the human mind and its relationship to the material world

Descartes thought: How do you know you're really reading this book?

Dreams, demons, and brains in vats

In any case, your reason for believing that you're **reading a book** is that you're having just the sorts of experiences you'd expect to have while reading.

our **senses "tell" us** things all the time.

Yet for all that, there are well-known cases where what our experiences tell us is **not real** at all. Example: Bad **dreams**.

how do you know reality is always more vivid than a dream? On the basis of your **memory of past dreams?**

there is nothing in the **nature of experiences** themselves that can tell you one way or the other whether they are waking or dreaming - in which case, experience, by itself, cannot tell you whether what you're experiencing right now is real.

BIV argument in dream format or example.

According to **Descartes** even if you really are **dreaming** right now, are a **brain in a vat**, or the victim of a deceiving **evil spirit**, you still must exist in the first place in order to do the dreaming or to be deceived.

Indeed, if you're worrying about whether or not you're dreaming, whether there's such a demon, or whether you even exist at all, **you must exist in order to do the worrying.**

"I think, therefore I am." is in Descartes's view, the starting point of all knowledge and the absolute stopping point of all doubt.

Is the **physical universe** you've always assumed existed outside your mind – the mundane world of tables, chairs, rocks, trees, other human beings, dogs, cats and other animals, planets, stars and galaxies - is all that real too?

It might seem that if all **perceptual experiences** could be false, then there just is no way to know that anything else exists.

Solipsism - the view that "I alone exist."

Indirect realism

Descartes himself was no solipsist. **Descartes was a staunch realist**, who firmly believed that the world of external, objective, physical objects exists

But he thought that **we don't know the external world directly.** What we do know directly are the contents of our own minds, the rich stream of experiences that constitutes everyday conscious life.

In perception, on Descartes's view: when a book really is out there and is what's causing you to have a "**bookish**" experience, then you really are seeing it, though indirectly; when it's a **dream** or **virtual reality** device or demon causing the experience, you're not seeing it at all.

Either way what you "see" directly is never the book itself but only a **perceptual representation** of the book.

This view, that all we are ever immediately aware of, is the "**veil of perceptions**" that constitutes our conscious experiences, is known variously as *indirect realism*, *representative realism* or *causal realism*.

Hallucination of a dagger in one's hand could be as vivid as really seeing and feeling it there. But in the case of hallucinations, it obviously can't be an external physical object that one is directly aware of.

what one is directly aware of must be something else - a perceptual representation in the mind.

There is also the matter of the **causal relations** existing between perceptual experiences of physical objects and the objects themselves.

But there is a surprisingly long chain of causes involved in even so simple an experience as the seeing of a lemon.

How could you be *directly* aware of something that might not even exist?

1. By **stimulating the brain** so as artificially to produce a neural process that is normally associated with a certain veridical perceptual experience, it is possible in principle to bring about a hallucination that is subjectively indistinguishable from that experience.
2. But if the immediate causes of **veridical perceptual experiences** and their **hallucinatory counterparts** are of the same sort, then these effects must be of the same sort as well.
3. In the case of **hallucinations**, the effect is obviously direct awareness not of any external physical object, but rather of a subjective mental, perceptual representation of an external object.
4. So in the case of veridical perceptual experiences too, what one is directly aware of, must be a **subjective perceptual representation**.

Again, this is not to deny that in veridical perceptions you really do perceive external, objective, independently existing physical objects. It's just that you perceive them only indirectly, through your direct awareness of something is subjective and mental. You do indeed really see the lemon, but only on the private television screen of your mind, just as you really see the astronauts, but only on the literal television set in your living room.

Skepticism

So, we still haven't really answered the question of how anyone who starts from where Descartes did, can get beyond there, to a **genuine knowledge of the existence of a world outside the mind**.

This brings us to a motivation that many philosophers have had for trying to avoid indirect realism, opting instead for a '**direct realist**' view, on which we have unmediated perceptual contact with physical reality.

Indirect realism threatens us with *skepticism* about the external world.

The facts about hallucination, the causal mediation between our experiences and the world, the dependence of perceptual experiences on events in the brain, facts that no one denies - these are **what make skepticism possible, whether or not they also support indirect realism**.

So, the suggestion that indirect realism must be rejected because it would lead us into a skeptical problem seems to cut little ice.

Indeed, it might even be argued that an advantage indirect realism has over direct realism, vis-a-vis skepticism, is that it better accounts for why there is a skeptical problem in the first place.

But if we are usually directly aware of external objects, it is puzzling **why we should sometimes have experiences that are just like the veridical ones** but in which we are not aware of any external objects at all, and why those non-veridical experiences should be so much like the veridical ones.

For these reasons, indirect realism might have greater explanatory power than direct realism.

Descartes answered skepticism by **appealing to the idea of God**, an idea that one finds within one's own mind whether or not that mind has any contact with an external physical reality.

Descartes's argument to prove **God is an all-good being**; and such a being would not allow one to be mistaken in general, for that would be contrary to his goodness.

But then it follows that He would not allow one always to be dreaming, or deceived by an evil spirit, or whatever. Therefore, if one's senses lead one to believe in the reality of an external, physical world, there must really be such a world.

But many philosophers argue that the **commonsense belief that there are external objects corresponding to our perceptual experiences** is a kind of *quasi-scientific hypothesis* that forms the best explanation of those experiences, an explanation that is constantly confirmed by the successful predictions we make on its basis.

If our belief in electrons can be rationally justified by virtue of their being posited by a well-confirmed scientific theory, then so too can our belief in external physical objects, despite the fact that they are not directly observable.

A well-known principle of scientific explanation is *Occam's razor*, which holds that simpler and more economical hypotheses are to be preferred to needlessly complex ones, because they raise fewer further mysteries.

a skeptic could argue that the "evil spirit" hypothesis is simpler and more economical than the commonsense view and is thus to be preferred.

However, as the physicist David Deutsch has argued, skeptical hypotheses like the brain in a vat and evil spirit scenarios are actually more complicated than the commonsense belief in an external physical world, not less; for **they are parasitic on the commonsense belief**.

the evil spirit hypothesis really isn't as simple or economical as the commonsense view after all and Occam's razor should lead us to reject it in favor of the latter.

Appearance and reality, mind and matter

there is a gap between our experience of the physical universe and that universe itself; between appearance and reality, mind and world.

The aspects of your sensations - the way things look, feel, smell, taste, and sound - are referred to by philosophers as *qualia* which are unique to the **mind**. A **thermostat's** example of functionality.

a coherent and unified picture of the world, of which you are **consciously aware** as such a picture of the world.

Moreover, you can think rationally about this picture and wonder whether it corresponds to any reality outside;

and these **thoughts**, as well as the picture itself, have **meaning** or significance, representing the world as being a certain way.

They have what philosophers call **intentionality**, the property of being directed at or about something, in the way that, say, pictures of cats or the word "cat" are about, mean or represent cats, rather than being mere meaningless squiggles of ink or paint.

These **features of the mind - qualia, and the unified conscious awareness** of which they are a part, **rational thought and the intentionality** it exhibits - together comprise the **domain of the thinking subject** whose situation Descartes vividly presents us with in the strange thought experiments with which we began this chapter.

The reality of the first-person or subjective point of view of the **"I" or self** wonders about the outside world - whether it exists at all, what it's like, what relation the self bears to it. This domain of the subject seems very different from that external reality itself.

It is a world we know from science to be composed ultimately of fundamental particles which have none of the features presented to us in experience, but are colorless, odorless, tasteless, and best described in the abstract mathematical language of physics.

And this is no less true of our **bodies and brains** than of any other part of the physical world.

So, how could they in any way be the seat of the rich **domain of conscious, rational thought** through which we know that physical world?

How could any material thing - including the grey, squishy lump of matter that constitutes your brain, which seems as brutally physical as a thermostat - have feelings, smells, tastes, and qualia in general?

How could it be conscious and aware of itself and its surroundings?

And how could it think rationally about itself and those surroundings, or have intentionality?

After all a thermostat's existence surely involves nothing more than the passage of electrical current through wires, the motion of a needle across a surface, and so forth; there is no consciousness there, no meaningful and rational thought, only crude mechanical processes.

But how different, really, are the electro chemical signals sent between the neurons of the brain? How are these any less intrinsically meaningless and unconscious than the electricity passing through the wiring of a thermostat?

Yet though it is difficult to see how the mind could be anything purely physical, modern science is often taken to imply that it nevertheless somehow is, that every aspect of our mental lives can be accounted for in terms of electrochemical processes in the brain and central nervous system.