

Idealism Operationalized: Charles Peirce's Theory of Perception

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Analytic Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Perception



- This paper located against a debate between contemporary advocates of **pragmatism** and **German idealism**.
- **Robert Brandom: analytic pragmatism → inferentialism.** Mental content is defined purely in terms of what inferences it licenses in a ‘game of giving and asking for reasons’.
- Much in early Peirce also seems inferentialist (e.g. denial of *intuition*: namely “a premise not itself a conclusion”.)
- Issues over ‘strong’ vs ‘hyper-’ inferentialism, particularly vivid w.r.t colour concepts. Where Brandom stops short at the former, Peirce arguably instantiates the latter (Legg, 2008).
- **Paul Redding:** the sticking point for analytic pragmatism is making sense of **experience**. Brandom fails to do justice to the way in which **in perception** we form beliefs *de re* as well as *de dicto*.

Analytic Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Perception

Chair C



“Chair C is yellow”

- Perceiving a yellow chair seems to be something more than, say, coming to believe the proposition “*Chair C is yellow*” involuntarily.
- Does Peirce’s pragmatism also have an ‘experience problem’?

Peirce, Inferentialism, and Perception



- Peirce paid considerable attention to perception later in his career (~1902-3).
- In order to highlight the uniqueness of Peirce's theory, it is contrasted with the remarkably different account of Hume.
- Hume's theory may be viewed as a high water mark of representationalism (understood as the denial of inferentialism), insofar as he imagines that every *idea* is a copy of some simple *impression* received from the world directly.
- We will see that Peirce's theory also has two layers: a *percept* and a *perceptual judgment*. But they, and their relationship, are very different from Hume's impressions and ideas.
- (Many of the differences derive from Hume's *nominalism*, by contrast to Peirce's dedicated *scholastic realism*.)

Hume's Theory of Perception: "All Ideas which are Different, are Separable"



- Hume offers an essentially mechanistic account of perception, modelling direct causal contact between the mind and objects both 'internal' and 'external'.
- This contact somehow generates *impressions* and *ideas*.
- The difference between these two consists merely in **"the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness"** (*Treatise*, 1, I, i, p. 1).
- Ideas are less "lively" *copies* taken by the mind of impressions – something like a stamp and its imprint.



Hume's Theory of Perception: "All Ideas which are Different, are Separable"



This is obviously a metaphor, but one which arguably captures two important features of perception for Hume:

- **1) It is *direct*.** It has no intermediary, for instance in other, rational, faculties of the mind.
- Ironically, this creates the famous 'veil of ideas', or Humean phenomenalism, since one cannot 'think behind' one's impressions of the world and form other ideas about it, because all ideas are copies of impressions.
- Nevertheless in the impression-forming process the mind is envisaged to **directly confront the world**. And surely this (in some form) is what perception must consist in?



Hume's Theory of Perception: "All Ideas which are Different, are Separable"



- 2) The process is *determinate*.** Impressions and ideas are particulars possessed of a determinate set of features copied precisely and wholesale.
- Hume argues for this claim phenomenologically by mentally comparing one of his impressions and its corresponding idea and arguing that no features have been lost: ***When I shut my eyes and think of my chamber, the ideas I form are exact representations of the impressions I felt; nor is there any circumstance of the one, which is not to be found in the other*** (*Treatise*, 1, I, i, p. 3)
 - (One might legitimately query the introspective research methodology here. But the quote is illustrative.)



Hume's Theory of Perception: "All Ideas which are Different, are Separable"



- 3) Hume's impressions and ideas are temporal particulars.** They occur at a particular time–point and there is no temporal duration within the impression or idea itself.
- Within the Humean perspective this very notion sounds bizarre and unmotivated. Nevertheless it will be returned to...



The Experience – Truth Gap

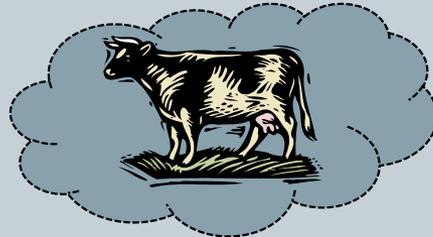


- A significant problem for any philosophy of perception is how to reconcile two aspects of the mind's encounter with the world which seem rather different and opposed:
 - 1) My perceptions are **suffused with immediately felt experience** (for instance, the juicy, sweet 'cherry-ness' of a cherry I am biting into) which it seems that in some important sense 'no-one can take away from me'. The nature of our sensory feels appears to enjoy some degree of *indubitability*. (***“Even if that cherry was a total hallucination, I can't be wrong about how it tasted to me.”***)
 - 2) Much of the point of perception seems to be to enable us to **endorse new propositions about the world that are truth-apt**. (***“This cherry is delicious! But is it really a cherry, or rather a small plum?”***) In this way our perceptions seem perfectly *dubitable*.
- This is all rather confusing. We might dub this *The Experience-Truth Gap* in perception.

Intermediary Perceptual Objects



- Thus, in philosophy of perception one traditionally encounters talk of *seemings*, *sense-data*, and other like entities, which are postulated as further objects of perception than the real-world objects allegedly being perceived.
- What is said about the intermediary objects is then treated as bearing the full weight of perception's apparent **indubitability**.
- What is said about the real-world objects is treated as bearing the full weight of perception's apparent **dubitability**.
- **For classic texts, see (Russell, 1912) (Ayer, 1958). For a particularly nuanced account, see (Sellars, 1982). For a probing critique of the framework, see (McDowell, 1994)**



Intermediary Perceptual Objects



- However, postulating these intermediary objects arguably doesn't solve the Experience-Truth Gap.
- If the role of representing sensory feels is given over entirely to the intermediary objects, delicate issues emerge concerning which of the qualities of those objects are **primary** (had by intermediary and real-world objects) and which merely **secondary** (had by intermediary objects alone), leading to scepticism about whether there are any primary qualities, or any that can be known.
- Meanwhile, if the role of logical assessability is given over entirely to statements about putative real world objects, we seem to be deprived of sufficient contact with them to be able to assess them properly.
- (British Empiricism seeks to paper over the breach by designing its key concept of an **idea** to play the dual role of both representing sensory feels and being logically assessable).

Peirce's Theory of Perception: "Nothing at all...is absolutely confrontitional"



- I will now discuss the detailed theory of perception which Charles Peirce developed around 1902-3.
- By contrast to the British Empiricists' use of *ideas* to model both immediate experience and truth-apt propositions derived from that experience, Peirce suggests that we need separate, though interlocking, accounts of these two things.
- The first becomes his account of the ***percept***, the second his account of the ***perceptual judgment***.



The Percept



- The percept comprises a *felt quality* and the *vividness* with which it is presented. Neither of these is ‘cognitive’. The percept is not a Humean idea. Nor does it express truth-claims.
- It “**...does not stand for anything. It obtrudes itself upon my gaze; but not as a deputy for anything else, not ‘as’ anything. It simply knocks at the portal of my soul and stands there in the doorway.**” (7.619).
- Peirce notes that one might call the percept an “image”, except that an image is often taken to represent something other than itself, and the percept does not do that (CP 7.619). Nevertheless it has *insistency*: along three dimensions:
 - It *contributes something positive* to my thinking
 - It *compels* my thinking
 - It is *not reasonable*: “**...it does not address the reason, nor appeal to anything for support**” (CP 7.622).

The Percept



- The percept also has a *definiteness*, along two dimensions:
 - It is *individual*: the percept pertains to some particular chair and no other.
 - It is *perfectly explicit*: all of its determinables are determinate.
- Thus the yellowness of the chair-percept will be some perfectly specific colour, such as a pale saffron, whereas the predicate ‘yellow’, in the proposition, ‘*Chair C is yellow*’ due to its wide usage, must be more general.

Also, whereas the perceptual judgment with its chosen colour-predicate makes no comment on other ‘chair-determinables’, such as *shape*, these will exist in the percept too.



The Perceptual Judgment



- The perceptual judgment has propositional structure. E.g. “*Chair C is yellow*”. Therefore the percept has an *integration* which cannot be possessed by the perceptual judgment:
- **“The judgment, ‘This chair appears yellow’, separates the color from the chair, making the one predicate and the other subject. The percept, on the other hand, presents the chair in its entirety and makes no analysis whatever”** (7.631).
- The perceptual judgment therefore cannot be a copy of the percept, as they are too unlike one another.
- They are: **“...as unlike... as the printed letters in a book, where a Madonna of Murillo is described, are unlike the picture itself”** (5.54).

The Perceptual Judgment



- As the perceptual judgment expresses a proposition which can be true or false, its interpretation is thrown open to the community of inquiry (or logical space), to which each judgment properly belongs, i.e.: **“...an endless series of judgments, each member of which is logically related to prior members”** (Forster, p. 120)
- These inquirers may develop the meaning of *yellow* and *chair* in unanticipated ways....



Questions Arising



- Despite its pathways into public discourse, however, the perceptual judgement *compels assent* as much as the percept. If I open my eyes in front of a yellow chair I cannot avoid having certain sensory experiences. In the same way, neither can I avoid judging “*This is a yellow chair*”, if I have the appropriate concepts.
- But how is it possible that the perceptual judgment produce such compulsive belief? Doesn't this endow it with a form of *de facto* indubitability?
- We have just noted that the perceptual judgment opens out logically into the community of inquiry, in which inquirers doubt and correct their beliefs. **Surely it cannot be both dubitable and indubitable at the same time?**
- Also, how do the percept and perceptual judgment relate to one another? **How is it possible for the perceptual judgment to represent the percept, if they are so different?**

Superficial Initial Answer: The Percept Subsequently Doubted and Dismissed



- **Re. dubitability of perception.** This is an important objection.
- A superficial initial answer might point out a temporal dimension to the belief-forming process, and note that the perceptual judgment is *indubitable at the time*, but might be corrected subsequently in the light of further percepts. (***“For an instant I saw a yellow chair in the corner. But when I blinked and looked again I only saw floorboards. Therefore I infer that what previously appeared to me as a perception of a yellow chair was in fact a hallucination, and I choose to ignore it.”***)



But we will see that in Peirce's philosophy the temporal mediation of *what we perceive* applies on a yet profounder level.

The Relation between Percept and Perceptual Judgment: The Percipuum



- **Re. Relation between percept and perceptual judgment:** The British empiricists were too unimaginative in assuming that the only possible relation between impression and idea was one of *copying*. It is not a relation of copying.
- Peirce notes that it is not a logical relation either, since this would require that the percept serve as some kind of premise from which the perceptual judgment is inferred, and we have seen that the percept is not in propositional form.
- But what other kind of relation could there be??
- Peirce claims that **percepts cause perceptual judgements, while not being the source of their content**. In other words, the perceptual judgment is an **index**, or “*true symptom*” of the percept, just as a weathercock is a true symptom of the direction of the wind.
- What does this mean? How does it work?

The Relation between Percept and Perceptual Judgment: The Percipuum



- The human mind is organised such that each percept causes “***direct and uncontrollable interpretations***”. This mediating relation between a percept and its perceptual judgment Peirce calls the ***percipuum***.
- This process of causing interpretations *cannot be willed*. But it can be trained and perfected via the cultivation of appropriate **mental habits**.
- As we all know, parents train children to apply predicates useful in daily life (“food”, “bath”, “red”...). Over time, children learn how to produce correct judgments about their environment, aided by whatever perceptual experiences they notice reliably correlate with them. But the exact nature of the experiences themselves – in Wittgenstein’s famous phrase – may be ‘divided through’ as irrelevant.

The Experience-Truth Gap Mediated



- The answer to the Experience-Truth Gap in philosophy of perception is not to split the object of perception in two – postulating one object that is unreal but is actually perceived, and a second object that is real but ‘lies behind’ the first and is only inferred.
- Rather than two objects, the answer is **time**.
- The percipuum is not a temporal particular. It occurs across a time-span which has at its ‘back end’ a memory of the immediate past (which Peirce calls the ***ponecipuum***) and at its ‘front end’ an expectation of the immediate future (the ***antecipuum***).
- This time-span – of effectively infinitesimal duration – forms a ‘moving window’ in which each new perception enters the mind at the ‘front end’ in the form of anticipation just as the most recent falls back into memory. This internal structure is what endows the perception with its *meaning*.

Perception at t1



Perception at t2



Perception at t3...



LEGEND:

Ponecipuum

Percipuum

Antecipuum



These are not three consciously experienced stages in perception but analytical tools. Rosenthal: they are *"...not the building blocks of perception but a verification level brought about by a change of focus when a problem arises"* (p. 4)

Deeper True Analysis of Perceptual Indubitability



- We may now examine the promised deeper analysis of the indubitability of perceptual judgments.
- It is presented by Rosenthal in an acute analysis of this difficult passage by Peirce:

Now let us take up the perceptual judgment “This wafer looks red.” It takes some time to write this sentence, to utter it, or even to think it. It must refer to the state of the percept at the time that it, the judgment, began to be made. But the judgment does not exist until it is completely made. It thus only refers to a memory of the past; and all memory is possibly fallible and subject to criticism and control. (CP 5.544, 1903)

Deeper True Analysis of Perceptual Indubitability



- Rosenthal interprets this as saying that the perceptual judgment is indubitable not in the sense that doubts about it can be answered with certain knowledge, but in the “pragmatic” sense that **doubts about it cannot coherently be formulated:**

...to doubt it is to put into question something for which there is no tool for getting “behind” it to compare it with anything more fundamental. For us it must itself be the final court of appeal. The apprehension of an appearance is not certainly true as opposed to possibly false. It is “certain” in the sense that neither truth nor falsity is applicable to it...for what the percipuum is is determined only in its recognition and can be determined in no other way. It becomes a “repetition” of previous contents only by being assimilated to those contents in the perceptual judgment

Deeper True Analysis of Perceptual Indubitability



- To explore this further, let us return to the case of the disappearing yellow chair percept.
- Our initial analysis of this scenario held that we have two distinct percepts: the first percept judged ‘yellow-chair-like’ and the second percept judged to represent only floorboards.
- On the basis of such a mismatch, so close together in time, I infer that the first percept is a hallucination and so I both remember and disregard it.
- But what if a similar sensory event were to happen all the time, with yellow chair images momentarily appearing and disappearing without a trace?
- Would I continue to perceive and disregard them?



Deeper True Analysis of Perceptual Indubitability



- Peirce suggests, in a discussion of the action of optical illusions on the mind over time, that insofar as the yellow chair percepts were *regularly* recognized as illusory, they would become much less vivid and possibly disappear altogether:

It is one of the recognized difficulties of all psycho-physical measurement that the faculties rapidly become educated to an extraordinary degree. Thus, contrast-colors, when properly exhibited, are incredibly vivid. One is not easily persuaded that they are not real. Yet the experimenter becomes in time almost incapable of perceiving them. This is a case in which the same educational course which gives control over appearances which sometimes do and sometimes do not accord with the mass of experiences, only serves to strengthen the forcefulness of those appearances which always do so accord (CP 7.647).



Deeper True Analysis of Perceptual Indubitability



- The contrast-colour illusion involves staring at a bright red patch then looking at a white surface, which will initially appear to be green.
- Over time, as the mind learns that the white surface is ‘not really green’ the perceived greenness **literally fades**.
- When we study these illusions, they are quite obvious. This enables the training of the percept-to-perceptual judgment relation, which largely takes place unconsciously in childhood, to be reawakened and studied within an observable time-period.
- The most important thing to note is that the training is a **rational process**. Its guiding force is the mind making the best overall sense it can of *ponecipuum*, *percipuum* and *antecipuum* as a total package.
- If that involves imperceptibly reinterpreting something just apparently seen as in fact illusory, then so be it.

Idealism Operationalized



- Hookway puts this point well:

What we experience is not just a clash between our beliefs and our experience; we often experience incoherence within the experience itself, which simultaneously involves anticipations and thwarts those very anticipations. The fact that, in these cases, ‘the perceptual judgment, and the percept itself, seems to keep shifting from one general aspect to another and back again (CP 5.183) shows that the percept is not entirely free from...characters that are proper to interpretations (CP 5.184) (Hookway, 2012, p. 17).

- Thus future experience can, at least in part, **literally determine previous experience.**
- Thus in Peirce’s understanding of perception “**nothing at all...is absolutely confrontational**” – although he does us the favour of adding, “**although it is quite true that the confrontational is continually flowing in upon us**” (CP, 7.653).

Idealism Operationalized



- The overall theme of this paper is **idealism operationalized** – how pragmatism might motivate, and explicate, the idea of reality as representational.
- Such “identity between mind and world” is of course one of idealism’s defining ideas. It scares many contemporary philosophers. Redding well describes how the claim that “***fact is independent of experience***” is part of the creation myth of analytic philosophy (p. 2).
- We might perhaps assuage this by viewing the idea of reality as representational in a **metaphysical** key: as meaning merely that predicates have some role to play in ontological commitment. The world contains yellowness as well as yellow things. (*Surely if the world contains yellow things it must also contain yellowness? This is an old, old story...*)
- But a key challenge for idealism is making sense of **perception**. Don’t we need to posit, and explicate, some primal confrontation between the mind and worldly objects?

Idealism Operationalized



- What makes Peirce's theory of perception an idealism operationalized, what makes this a distinctive contribution from pragmatism to idealism, is the role played by **habit**.
- It is habit (continually refined and corrected) which laces the perceptual judgment to the percept over time, enabling the former to index the latter.
- **Habit** is the ur-ingredient of mental life for the pragmatist, as **idea** is for the British Empiricists.
- In habit we see the universal 'from the inside', not as metaphysical posit but as lived (generalising, judging) experience. Within this lived experience, the fluidity of the nexus between percept and perceptual judgment (and the fact that the fluidity is two-way – percepts modifying perceptual judgments *and vice versa*) can even be exposed – and itself perceived – with the help of certain optical illusions.

Thank you!
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