AQUINAS, EVIDENCE, AND PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT: Perceptual experiences are commonly regarded as evidence. For example, when one has an experience of a tree, this is typically viewed as evidence for the belief that there is a tree. However, there is more than one view about the nature of perceptual experiences, and it is not clear that every view of perception is equally adequate to the task of accounting for experience's evidential role. In this paper I will do two things. First, I argue that neither a sense-data view of perception nor a direct realist view of perception can adequately account for the fact that perceptual experiences count as evidence. Second, I outline a third view of perception: that of Thomas Aquinas, who holds that experiences have intentional mediating content that directs the mind to the world. I argue that Aquinas's view is able to avoid the inadequacies of both the sense-data theorist and the direct realist and thus can better account for the evidential role of perceptual experience.

KEYWORDS: perception, evidence, Thomas Aquinas, direct realism, indirect realism, intentionality

1. Introduction

Perceptual experiences are commonly regarded as evidence. For example, when one has an experience of a tree, this is typically viewed as evidence for the belief that there is a tree. However, there is more than one view about the nature of perceptual experiences, and it is not clear that every view of perception is equally adequate to the task of accounting for experience's evidential role. In this paper I will do two things. First, I argue that neither a sense-data view of perception (see, e.g., Jackson 1977; Robinson, 1994; O'Shaughnessy 2003) nor a direct realist view of perception (see, e.g., Brewer 2008; Kalderon 2011; Genone 2014; French and Phillips 2020), can adequately account for the fact that perceptual experiences count as evidence. Second, I outline a third view of perception: that of Thomas Aquinas, who holds that experiences have intentional mediating content that directs the mind to the world (see, e.g., Haldane 1983; Stump 2003; Lisska 2016). I argue that Aquinas's view is able to avoid the inadequacies of both the sense-data theorist and the direct realist and thus can better account for the evidential role of perceptual experience.[1]

[1] One may understand the term 'direct realism' to mean that the mind does not need to make an inference from sense data to the things in the world; rather, the things in the world are immediately present through the experience. If this is the case, then the 'Direct Realist View', as I am calling it here, is merely one species of direct realism, and Aquinas's intentional realism would

To clarify, I am not taking a position on what view of knowledge or epistemic justification is most consistent with the Thomistic corpus. For example, Scott McDonald (1993, 160–95) and Robert Pasnau (2002, 308) interpret Aquinas as a classical foundationalist whereas Eleonore Stump (2003, 217-242) and Anthony Lisska (2016, 188-193) favor a reliabilist interpretation of Aquinas. I am not taking a position on this debate. Rather, I am merely arguing that of the three realist views of perception that I consider, Aquinas's works best for a modest foundationalist view of perceptual evidence, where 'modest foundationalism' is understood to be the view that experiences are the items that have the primitive power to justify beliefs. Further, while I argue that one interpretation of Aquinas's views about the metaphysics of perception is a strong candidate for fulfilling the role of perceptual evidence, it is also possible that there are other views of perception which succeed equally well at avoiding the problems I outline. It is not my goal to rule this out.

My project is an interesting one: it treats three topics that are underdeveloped in the literature surrounding evidence. First, it rules out some metaphysical views of perceptual experience as inadequate to the task of counting as evidence. Second, it examines Aquinas's view of the metaphysics of perception with respect to the literature on evidence; Aquinas' account of perception is not often considered in this capacity but plausibly succeeds at fulfilling the evidential role where other views fail. Lastly, it makes steps towards understanding what a Thomistic account of perceptual evidence would look like.

2. Preliminaries

2.1 Characteristics of Evidence

I will now outline two essential characteristics of evidence.[2] I am not arguing that these characteristics are sufficient for something to count as evidence. However, these 'marks' of evidence are necessary conditions for something to be evidence. The purpose of outlining these characteristics is so that we have a measure by which to judge the following views of perceptual experience. It seems like perceptual experience is the kind of thing that should count as evidence. So, if some metaphysical view of perception cannot make sense of even one of the essential marks of evidence, then that view would not have the power to function as evidence.

The first and arguably most fundamental feature of evidence is the power of evidence to justify belief. For example, when one has the experience of a tree, this is

also qualify as a direct realist view. However, the term 'direct realist view' is being used here to refer only to the species of direct realism outlined in section 4.1 and not also Aquinas's.

[2] For a helpful overview of the literature on evidence see: (Kelly 2014).

evidence for the proposition that there is a tree. Similarly, perception can count as evidence against a belief such as when one thought a ball was under the table, looked, and saw that there was none. Oftentimes, scholars simply assume that this feature is the core aspect of evidence. Patrick Rysiew (2011, 209), Thomas Kelly (2008, 933-934), Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (2008, 84-86) all take justificatory power to be a foundational, if not the principal characteristic of evidence.

Secondly, it is commonly thought that the phenomenology of evidence is assertive or has presentational force. For example, Michael Huemer contrasts imagining a tomato with the visual experience of a tomato. The perceptual experience, he thinks, has a *forcefulness* that represents its contents as real or actualized whereas mere imagination does not (Huemer 2001, 77). Other thinkers such as William Tolhurst (1998, 298-300) and James Pryor (2000, 547) have called this phenomenon the *assertive* character of evidence, but the basic idea is the same (see also, Tucker 2010, 530). When something in our experience presents itself as evidence, our mental state has the felt character of presenting its contents as-being-the-case.

2.2 Three Realist Views of Perception

I will now outline the terms by which I will characterize the three views of perceptual experience. I will outline four commitments and identify the three combinations of acceptance and rejection of these commitments that I am interested in. I have borrowed the classificatory scheme I use here from Tim Crane and Craig French (2021). I will call the four commitments: (i) *Ordinary Object Presentation*, (ii) *Unmediated Presentation*, (iii) *Common Kind Claim*, and (iv) *Direct Realist Presentation*.

(i) *Ordinary Object Presentation* is the claim that perceptual experiences are presentations of ordinary mind-independent objects. In other words, perceptual experience is typically about things in the world. Ordinary object presentation is consistent with ordinary objects being present in experience either directly (without mediation) or indirectly (with mediation), but in either case, the thing presented must be the ordinary object in the world. Additionally, this view does not entail that perceptual experiences can only be of ordinary objects in the world; it is only committed to the claim that perceptual experiences are often and typically of ordinary objects.

(ii) On the other hand, *Unmediated Presentation* is the view that perceptual experiences are direct perceptual presentations of their objects. Unmediated Presentation, unlike ordinary object presentation, does not necessitate that the item in a subject's experience is about ordinary objects. For example, in the case of

perceiving an apple, unmediated presentation is consistent with experience merely being about human mental states (such as the sense-impression of an apple) that have no connection to the external world. However, someone who affirmed Ordinary Object Presentation could not consistently deny that the items presented in our experience are about ordinary objects in the world (the apple itself and not only sense impressions are presented in one's experience).

(iii) Another condition that one could affirm is the *Common Kind Claim*. The Common Kind Claim is the idea that veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences form a common kind. The Common Kind Claim could be endorsed in more than one way, but all those who affirm the Common Kind Claim hold that there is something in common between good and bad perceptual experiences. Those who deny the common kind claim hold that a veridical perceptual experience is essentially different than a bad perceptual experience; in other words, someone who denies the common kind claim thinks that it is essential to perceptual experiences that they be factive.

(iv) Lastly, there is *Direct Realist Presentation*. This is the requirement that perceptual experiences are direct perceptual presentations of ordinary objects. Here, 'direct' is taken to mean unmediated in the sense of rejecting any mediating entity that comes in between or facilitates the mind's contact with the world. Direct Realist Presentation is the conjunction of Unmediated Presentation and Ordinary Objects. While one could consistently deny Direct Realist Presentation, but affirm Unmediated Presentation because one's experience could be directly of sense-data. It is not possible for one to consistently affirm Direct Realist Presentation and deny Unmediated Presentation because Direct Realist Presentation is a version of unmediated presentation.

3. Sense-Data View of Perception

3.1 The Sense-Data view

The Sense Data view of perception affirms Common Kind and Unmediated Presentation, but denies Ordinary Objects and Direct Realist Presentation. The upshot of this view is that the objects presented in our experience are primarily mental objects called 'sense-data' and not ordinary objects in the world. For example, this view holds that in an experience appropriately caused by an apple, all that is present to us through the experience are sense impressions of the apple and not the apple itself. This view endorses the Common Kind claim and distinguishes veridical cases of perception from erroneous cases by the causal source of the experience. For

example, in a good or veridical case of perception, the sense-data was caused by the world, whereas in bad cases, the sense data was not caused in the appropriate way.

It is significant that this view affirms Unmediated Presentation and denies Ordinary Objects because this entails that there is no sense in which our experiences, even though they involve sense data, are about objects in the world. Ordinary objects are only inferred from sense experience and are not the objects presented by sense experience. This view of perception is classically associated with thinkers in the British empiricist tradition (see, e.g., Locke 1996; Berkley 1982; Hume 1978), but it has its contemporary defenders as well (Jackson 2009; Robinson 1994; O'Shaughnessy 2003).

3.2 Objections to Sense-Data Perception Counting as Evidence

My first objection has to do with making sense of the presentational force that evidence has. It is plausible to think that the presentational force of perceptual evidence is at least dependent upon what Tolhurst calls its "mind-to-world direction fit" (Tolhurst 1998, 293-294). In other words, perceptual evidence presents or asserts some state of affairs as being the case.

Now, because the sense data theorist explicitly affirms Unmediated Presentation, this puts them in a very difficult position to account for the assertive character of perceptual evidence. The affirmation of Unmediated Presentation is essentially the denial that there is mediating content to sensory experience; rather, experience is just directly of its object. In this case, the object can only exist in the mind. Then, it is difficult to see how perceptual evidence could contain contents that present some state of affairs distinct from itself as being the case and account for the assertoric character of evidence because the "mind-to-world direction fit" or intentional character of perceptual experience is explicitly denied. The mind is not directed beyond the sense-data; the theory is explicit that the object of the mind just is the sense-data.

The second problem for this view also arises because of its affirmation of Unmediated Presentation in conjunction with the denial of Ordinary Objects. These two views together entail that our perceptual experience is not about the world in a significant way. This is problematic because it would be unable to account for all of the justificatory power that we typically take our experiences to have. For example, it is common to think that our perceptual experiences are strong evidence that there exist objects in the external world. However, if our experiences are primarily of our inner mental states with no intentional presentation of external reality, then it is difficult to see a reason for taking our experiences to be evidence for external reality. Since the sense-data view cannot account for the character of perceptual experience

that presents objects in the world to us, it would seem to have difficulty accounting for the evidential capacity of perception.

4. Direct Realist View of Perception

4.1 Direct Realist View[3]

The direct realist affirms Ordinary Objects, Direct Realist Presentation, and Unmediated Presentation, but denies Common Kind. In other words, this view holds that what is present in our experience is unmediated access to the external world. However, because of this strong realist position, the view results in a rejection of common kind because the only contents of the experience are the ordinary objects in the world. That is, the direct realist must hold that illusions and hallucinations are something different in kind from ordinary perceptual experiences (see, e.g., Brewer 2008; Kalderon 2011; Genone 2014).

For the direct realist, only the veridical cases are perceptual experiences, and the bad cases (think, brain in a vat) are something other than perceptual experience. This is not merely a semantic dispute, but a substantive metaphysical disagreement over whether perception is a factive mental state or not. Duncan Pritchard (2011) and Timothy Williamson (1997) both explicitly maintain that all evidence is factive. A mental state is factive if it entails the truth of the contents specified by the mental state. For example, on the factive view, seeing that 2+2=4 entails the truth that 2+2=4. One who denies Common Kind can affirm that perception is factive, but one who affirms Common Kind must deny that perception is factive at least in some respect. This is because one who affirms Common Kind holds that one's perceptual mental state has something in common between both the veridical and hallucinatory cases.

4.2 Objections to Direct Realist Perception Counting as Evidence

I take it as a given that an adequate account of evidence will hold that perceptual experience can count as evidence. Any view of perception that can be shown to entail that perception does not count as evidence is, by reductio, a bad view of perceptual experience. The argument against the Direct Realist goes as follows,

1) If a) in phenomenally identical cases of perception, where one is veridical and the other not, what justifies one's belief is the same, and b) Common Kind is false, then it follows that perceptual experiences themselves cannot justify belief.

[3] See footnote 1.

2) In phenomenally identical cases of perception, where one is veridical and the other not, what justifies one's belief is the same.

3) Common Kind is false.

4) Thus, perceptual experiences cannot justify belief.[4]

The third premise is simply assumed by the Direct Realist, and I will not defend it here. In what follows, I will first argue that the conditional in premise one is true and then argue that premise two is true. The upshot of this argument is that, since perception is not the kind of thing that can justify belief, then it is difficult to see how perception could count as evidence on the direct realist's view.

Part 'a' of the first premise is similar in character to the new evil demon problem (see, e.g., Lehrer and Cohen 1983, 191-207; Cohen 1984, 279-295). There are two subjects who have identical phenomenal experiences, but the experiences of one subject are veridical and the other not. Further, they both have the same experience of basing their respective beliefs on the same experiences and, in fact, do base their beliefs on those experiences. It would seem that the first premise is true because, according to the view of the Direct Realist, perception is factive and so one is only perceiving in the good case. But if, as prescribed by 'a,' what justifies belief must be present in both the good and the bad cases, and one is perceiving only in the good case, then what justifies the beliefs of both subjects could not be perception.

Now, the second premise is obviously not one that will be accepted by epistemic disjunctivists such as Duncan Pritchard or by people who do not share new evil demon intuitions more generally (see, e.g., Pritchard 2011; Lasonen-Aarnio 2010). However, while I am content to accept that this argument will only be persuasive for people who are sympathetic to new evil demon arguments, it is also worth pointing out that taking a disjunctivist position about perceptual evidence is not altogether easy to maintain.

For example, Conee and Feldman note that by denying common content to the good and bad cases, epistemic disjunctivists give up a very plausible account of the indistinguishability of the good and bad cases, which is that their content is identical (Conee and Feldman 2011, 290-291). They also point out that epistemic disjunctivists would have to give some sort of explanation as to why someone in a good case of perception has more evidence than someone in a bad case when, by their lights, the subjects have the same reasons for holding their beliefs (Conee and Feldman 2011, 291). In addition, B.J.C. Madison persuasively argues that appeals to 'blamelessness' are unable to account for what is common between the good and bad cases. At the very least, epistemic disjunctivists raise some difficult questions for

[4] For arguments similar to this one see: (Fumerton 1985, 78; Huemer 2001, 129).

themselves. (Madison 2014, 61-70). We will now turn to consider the third view of perception.

5. Aquinas's Intentional Realist View of Perception

5.1 Aquinas's View of Perception

The intentional realist affirms Common Kind and Ordinary Objects but denies Direct Realist Presentation and Unmediated Presentation. The key upshot of this view is its rejection of both Direct Realist Presentation and Unmediated Presentation. The view holds that our perception is of ordinary objects but denies that this happens without mediation. In other words, there will be some sort of mediating mental state that is intentional or presents ordinary objects 'as being a certain way.' On this view, the mental content that is presenting the world is common to both good and bad cases of perception, but the object of perception is not necessitated to exist by the mediating content and so only exists in the good case. Nevertheless, our awareness is of ordinary objects in both the good and bad cases, regardless of whether those objects happen to exist.

While there are contemporary defenders of views similar to this (Huemer 2001; Putz 2010; Searle 2015), my focus here will be on the particular account Aquinas has to give of the mediating character of sense perception. I am not claiming that Aquinas explicitly embraces the totality of the above view described as intentional realism, but I maintain that the general outline of his view is amenable to such an account.

For Aquinas, human beings are able to receive sensible species of things in the world through their sense organs. The sensible species is a *likeness* of the thing in the world. So, for example, if there is a tree in my line of sight, then the first step in my perception of the tree is that the tree communicates a likeness of itself—i.e., a sensible species—to my external sense organs (Aquinas 2002, 70-73, I Q78.A3 body). However, the object of my cognition is not the likeness itself; rather, the likeness is the mediary by which I cognize the object in the world which is presented by the likeness (Aquinas 2002, 162-163, I Q85.A2 body).

Aquinas distinguishes two ways that a potency can receive a form. The first is according to the natural existence of the form, the second is according to the intentional existence of the form (Aquinas 1994, 172, paragraph 553). When a form exists naturally, it gives the substance that possesses the form the mode of existence proper to the form. For example, a tree form that has natural existence makes its substance exist as a tree. On the other hand, a form that has intentional existence does not make the substance that has the form exist according to its proper mode,

rather, there is merely a similarity or likeness between the intentional form and the substances that possess the form according to its natural mode of existence.

We are now in a position to consider what Aquinas calls the internal senses, which are faculties of the mind that process the sensible species after they have been received by the external sense organs (Aquinas 2002, 74-76, I Q78.A4 body). I will focus on the two inner senses most relevant to my project, the *sensus communis* or the common sense and the *vis cogitativa* or the cogitative power. I understand the difference between the common sense and the cogitative power to be that the common sense contributes the synthesizing of the diverse sensory inputs into a unified bundle (Aquinas 2002, 76, I Q78.A4 reply 2). The cogitative power, on the other hand, contributes the *individuality* and the *kind* of the object of perception (Aquinas 1994, 127, paragraph 396). But neither of these powers does the work of the agent intellect, which abstracts from the sensible species all individuating conditions so that some nature can be considered in the abstract. As I interpret it, the operation of the common sense and cogitative power upon the sensible species each adds a new level of intentional cognition to our perception of things in the world, unpacking and making available to our awareness the content received in the sensible species.[5]

5.2 How Aquinas's View Avoids the Problems of the Other Views

In this section I will show how Aquinas's view of perception is able to avoid the problems that the other two views of perception face. The sense data view has trouble with the presentational force and justification conditions because it affirms Unmediated Presentation and denies Ordinary Objects. As I interpret it, Aquinas's view is the opposite of this: he affirms Ordinary Objects but denies Unmediated Presentation. Hence, Aquinas's view of perception allows for the intentional character of perception or the 'mind to world direction fit,' whose denial results in the failure of the sense data view to account for the presentational force of evidence. At the very least, there is nothing in Aquinas's view that would explicitly rule out the possibility for experience to have presentational force. Further, because the intentional realist denies Unmediated Presentation but affirms ordinary objects,

[5] The role that I am attributing to the cogitative power in Aquinas's thought as drawing the individuality and kind of the object of perception from the sensible species is not uncontroversial. For example, Robert Pasnau (2002, 316-318) and Anthony Kenny (1993, 111-118) both take a position regarding the cognition of particulars that is incompatible with this reading. However, others such as Anthony Lisska (2016, 239-254) and John Jalsevac (2023, 267-292) both explicitly defend my reading of Aquinas regarding the role of the cogitative power. Here, I merely wish to flag the dispute and note that my position is dependent upon the position of Lisska and Jalsevac.

perceptual experience can be the kind of thing that justifies beliefs about ordinary objects because the presentational content is intentional or about the objects in the world.

Next, the direct realist view has difficulty accounting for the justificatory power of perceptual evidence because they affirm ordinary objects but reject common kind. The intentional realist avoids this problem by affirming common kind. For Aquinas the item that forms the common kind is the sensible species. This intermediary intentional object gives content to sensory perception but does not necessitate that what the mind is directed towards exist. In both the good and bad cases of perception, the contents of the perceptual experience and the object of perception are the same, but in the bad case what the contents direct the mind towards is not present but in the good case what the mind is directed towards is. Aquinas's view of perception can count as evidence and have justificatory power because he rejects premise three in the argument against the direct realist. There is something common between the good case and the bad case and it is in virtue of this item that perception has justificatory power.

In conclusion, by affirming intentional content, Aquinas is able to walk a middle way between the Sense Data theorist and the Direct Realist. While this paper has not attempted to show that Aquinas's view of perception is the only account that can make sense of experience's evidential character, we have seen that Aquinas's account of perception is significantly better than the most common alternative theories and can very plausibly fulfill the role of evidence in our experience.[6]

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