

A Brief Note on How Phenomenal Objects Relate to Objects Themselves

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Abstract. This brief note corrects some basic errors in Meijsing's (2011) *JCS* paper on "The Whereabouts of Pictorial Space", concerning the status of phenomenal objects in the reflexive model of perception. In particular I clarify the precise sense in which a phenomenal object relates to the object itself (the noumenal object) in visual perception.

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What and where is phenomenal space? Monica Meijsing's (2011) *JCS* paper on "The Whereabouts of Pictorial Space" contrasts three views, the "mainstream" (biological naturalist) model of perception, my "projective" (reflexive) model of perception, and her own "adverbial" theory of perception. The first two models are versions of "indirect realism" while, according to her, the adverbial theory is "direct realist." She claims that each model can account for the phenomenal and experimental data, but only the adverbial theory is coherent. Her paper raises many interesting issues that would take a full paper (as lengthy as her own) to address. In this brief note I only have space to focus on a few fundamental issues and errors in her paper about my own views.¹

The reflexive model of perception

The reflexive model of perception is a way of thinking about how conscious experiences relate to the brain and physical world. Consider for example how your own experience of this printed page relates to (a) the preconscious perceptual processing in your brain that supports this experience and (b) the physical page itself. Viewed from the perspective of an external observer, light rays travelling from the physical page stimulate your eye, and activate your optic nerve, occipital lobes, and associated regions of your brain. Neural conditions sufficient for consciousness are formed, and result in your *visual conscious experience of the page*. What is this "visual conscious experience of the page"? It's just this *page as-seen* (the phenomenal page). There isn't any visual conscious experience of the page in addition to this page as-seen. Where is this phenomenal page? Out here where it seems to be in the

¹ In order to facilitate early publication of these corrections *JCS* have asked for a very brief treatment. This does not allow a critique of Meijsing's "Adverbial" theory, nor the mainstream model. However, an evaluation of the respective merits of mainstream "biological naturalism", the projective "reflexive model" and "transparency theory" (a more common form of direct realism) is given in Velmans (2008, 2009 chapter 7).

phenomenal world, located roughly where the physical page actually is.² It is in this psychological sense that the phenomenal page is “projected”.³

According to Meising, the notion that phenomenal worlds are projected has an implausible consequence: “if every perceiver projects a whole phenomenal world outwardly, the real world becomes very thickly smeared over with phenomenal worlds.” (Meising, 2011, p100). However, this is based on a simple misunderstanding that I have already dealt with in prior publications. The page as-seen is not made of stuff that can be smeared over the actual page, it is simply one *appearance* of the page itself that represents certain features of the page itself, conditioned by sensory, perceptual and cognitive processing. Although it would be misleading to think of the phenomenal page as being composed of “physical material” it does have an ontology that can initially be described in terms of its *phenomenal properties*. It looks white and smooth, it seems to bend in certain ways, it appears to be located and extended in phenomenal space in a certain place, and so on. While in everyday life we habitually *treat* properties such as perceived colour, felt texture, apparent shape, location and extension as “physical” properties of the page itself, according to the reflexive model these are only biologically evolved *representations* of the page itself that physics might describe in very different ways. Colour for example might be described in terms of light reflectance patterns, surface texture in terms of the crystal lattice structure of its constituent molecules, apparent location and extension in terms of *measured* location and extension, and so on. That’s why the reflexive model adopts indirect (critical) realism.

Given this distinction between the phenomenal page and the page itself (the noumenal page), what is the *object of perception*? According to Meising, both the mainstream model and my reflexive model propose that the page as-seen (the phenomenal object) is the object of perception, and that *this is incoherent*. Why? As she points out,

“If the phenomenal object, as constructed by processes of the brain and projected onto the real object, is the object of experience, this would mean that the phenomenal object *still has to be experienced*. Yet it seems that once the phenomenal object is formed and projected, the process of perception is already completed. There is no more experiencing to be done.” (Ibid, p100)

I entirely agree—however I have made it perfectly clear in previous writings (a) that once the phenomenal object is formed and projected the process of perception is already completed⁴ and (b) that the phenomenal object (e.g. this page as seen) is not the real object of experience—although in everyday life we often talk and think that way, for the simple reason that the phenomenal object is how the real object appears to us, and for ordinary purposes it

² According to the reflexive model, the phenomenal world is a biologically useful mental model of the world described by physics for objects and events at close distances, where interactions with those objects and events normally take place. Consequently where the page seems to be is roughly where the page actually is. At far distances however this phenomenal model breaks down. The limits of the phenomenal world are for example defined by the dome of the night sky studded with stars. However the apparent size and location of the stars gives very little indication of their actual size and location.

³ Brevity prevents a discussion of the scientific status of “perceptual projection”, the ontology of phenomenal space, or the precise way in which phenomenal space relates to space as described by physics and can be said to have measurable location and extension. For a detailed discussion, see Velmans (2008, 2009 chapters 6, 7 and 8).

⁴ See Velmans, 2000, pp185-188, 2009 pp 223-226.

suffices to treat the appearance as if it were the reality (in normal life we behave as naive realists). Here's a sample from the pages of this journal in which I discuss the object of experience when perceiving a cat:

"...there is just one material cat out there in the world—the "noumenal" cat which exists whether the subject perceives it or not. When the subject or the external observer looks at the noumenal cat, it is a phenomenal cat that they see. So we have a cat itself (the noumenal cat) whose existence and nature is observer-independent, and a seen (phenomenal) cat that *represents* the noumenal cat, whose existence and nature is observer-dependent. In everyday life we usually think of the cat we see as a "physical cat" and, for the purposes of everyday life, we usually treat it as being the cat itself rather than a representation of the cat itself. But this does not double the number of *actual* cats, not does it 'smear' any additional phenomenal cats all over the noumenal cat. Rather, the one, noumenal cat has as many numerically distinct appearances as there are views of it by individual observers." (Velmans, 2008, p41)

And by way of further explanation:

"... strictly speaking ...it is always the *cat itself* that one is looking at although it is a phenomenal cat that one sees, which makes the phenomenal cat the *observation* and the cat itself the *observed*. In everyday life we blur these distinctions for the reason that we habitually *treat* phenomenal objects to *be* the observed objects for the reason that this is how those objects appear to us. I will return to some of these distinctions below, when they become important to the issues under discussion—and I have unravelled them in depth in Velmans (2000) chapters 6, 7, and 8." (Ibid, p10, note 7)

In short, *not* guilty as charged! Nor, to my knowledge, have any genuine problems been found in more accurate analyses of the model in the literature to date. The reflexive model, and the broader reflexive monism that supports it, appear to be entirely coherent.

References

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