

# The World as We See it

## A Late-Wittgensteinian Argument for Direct Realism

Wolfgang Huemer\*

---

Ever since Brentano (re-)introduced the notion of 'intentional inexistence' it has become a commonplace in philosophy of mind to characterize (at least) most of our mental episodes by their being directed towards something as an object. The majority of these mental episodes, most notably our perceptual experiences, are directed towards objects that are part of our physical environment. The difficulty that philosophers since Brentano struggle with is to explain how our mental episodes that are part of the realm of the mental can be directed towards physical objects. In this paper I will argue that many of these attempts have had little success because they work with an underlying picture that is deceiving, a picture according to which there is a gap between mental episodes on the one side and physical objects that are "out there," on the other; and according to which that gap is bridged, in some mysterious way, by the intentional relation.

There can be hardly any doubt that our perceptual experiences are caused by the objects towards which they are directed. Several philosophers, however, have argued that causal theories of perception are insufficient to explain why our perceptual experiences can have content. In his attack of the Myth of the Given, Sellars has pointed out that our mental episodes stand in rational relations of justification to other mental episodes - they justify or are justified by them. A perceptual experience (understood as *seeing that*), to take a common example, is a propositional attitude that justifies perceptual beliefs and observational knowledge. This experience, however, cannot stand in rational relations to non-conceptual episodes like sensations or raw sense-data, nor can it stand in such relations to the actual object which does not have propositional structure, either. Thus, there can be only a causal, but not a rational, relation between object and experience. A merely causal relation, however, cannot justify the propositional content of the experience.

Dretske formulates a different argument in his book *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*. He points out that the causal relation is not a two-place relation between the object and the episode. Rather there is a long causal chain that leads up to the episode; the object towards which we are directed is just one of the many causal antecedents of the experience. Causal theories of perception, Dretske argues, cannot provide us with a criterion that allows us to pick out the object of our perceptual experience from the many causal antecedents of that experience.

Both Dretske's and Sellars's argument show that a merely causal account does not suffice to explain why our perceptual experiences have a specific content. In what follows I will defend the thesis that we can solve these problems if we appreciate the fact that the intentional relation between our experiences and their contents is not only determined by our physical environment, to which we are connected through a causal chain, but also by our social environment, i.e., by the way in which the persons around us interact with this physical environment. In other words, we need to engage in social practices in order to establish the intentional relation to the object; this relation is, thus, not only determined by our physical, but also by our social environment, or, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, they depend on our form of life.

This emphasis on the social aspect of intentionality has been criticized for leading to unwanted ontological consequences. Let us imagine a group of people that lives, for the sake of the argument, in a deep and hidden valley in the Alps and has never had any contact with other human beings. We can imagine that members of this Alpine tribe engage in social practices and speak a language - which is an important part of their social practices - that are quite different from ours. If the thesis that the contents of our experiences depend also on our social practices is correct, this means that their perceptual experiences are about different kinds of objects than ours. Even if we are under the same conditions in the same environment, the content of the perceptual experiences of the members of the Alpine tribe will differ from the content of our experiences. In other words, they do not see the world in the way we do.

In his article "On the very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" Davidson has shown that the language of our imaginary Alpine tribe must be translatable into ours - otherwise it would not qualify as a language. In consequence, it does not cause any difficulty to imagine that, given we have enough time and experience, we can learn to speak their language and, more generally, engage in their social practices. If the thesis of the social aspect of intentionality is correct, that means that we can learn to see the world as they do.

Davidson's argument, however, does not calm our ontological worries. It might still be argued that the thesis of the social aspect of intentionality entails a form of transcendental idealism: if we can know the object only through social practices we can never know the object as it really is, but only relative to these practices. If we move between different forms of life, as we do when we learn to see the world in the way the Alpine tribe does, we still know it only relative to certain social practices; we can never know it independently of them. We can learn to see the world through different lenses, as it were, but we must always wear some sort of lenses in order to see something as an object.

This argument also can be illustrated with the less exotic example of chess perception. In order to see a rook (in the sense of seeing as) one has to be able to engage in certain social practices - one has to know at least the basic rules of chess. If somebody who does not know anything about chess, who does not even know about the existence of this game, looks at the board at the same moment when I do, she *sees* a wooden figurine of a certain shape where I *see* a rook. Our perceptual experiences have different content because we engage in different social practices. In consequence, if my friend learns the rules of chess, she learns to *see* rooks as I do. At this point the transcendental idealist can come up with the following argument: the physical object out there is neither a rook nor a wooden figurine. It is a raw, unstructured object that you interpret as *a rook* and your friend as *a figurine*. Strictly speaking, the transcendental idealist continues, the two experiences have the same object. This object is, however, in an important sense inaccessible to all of us: we can know it only as *a rook* or as *a figurine*, etc., but we cannot know it as *it really is*. Thus, we end up advocating a form of transcendental idealism.

This argument depends on the assumption that we can meaningfully distinguish between the object as it is given through our social practices on the one hand and the object as it really is on the other. (For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this assumption as the 'transcendental assumption.')

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein offers an argument that shows that this assumption cannot be meaningfully formulated. If we accept the transcendental assumption, the argument goes, we undermine the very basis of our language game - with the consequence that we lose the very possibility of stating this assumption.

According to the later Wittgenstein, as is well known, the meaning of our words and the truth-value of our sentences depend on criteria that are determined by our social practices. We acquire these social practices in the process of growing up, by learning to play a language game. This process starts with the child's being trained to interact in a certain way with the world, a world that is there independently of our interacting with it. The child acquires a background that consists of practices some of which can be described as tacit assumptions or beliefs. She does not, however, acquire these practices and beliefs one by one, she rather acquires a whole set of beliefs at once or, to use a Wittgensteinian metaphor: "Light dawns gradually over the whole." (OC, 21, § 141). The basis of the child's background is not her acquisition of beliefs like "This is a chair" and "This is a cup," for example, but her learning that she can sit on chairs and drink from cups, etc. Rather than acquiring a set of true propositions about chairs and cups, she learns about chairs and cups by interacting with her physical environment. "It is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of our language games." (OC, 28, § 204). The child learns to have mental episodes that are about objects like chairs and cups, etc., only

through these interactions with the physical world that are guided by the people around it. These interactions and social practices provide a background without which we could not have mental episodes at all. The child learns to play more complex language-games only on the basis of this background, as Wittgenstein points out when he compares this background to propositional knowledge: "The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn't so far know anything. Knowing begins at a higher level." (OC, 71, § 538).

For Wittgenstein the background is not just a set of propositions, it rather reaches down to the facts: our acting and interacting with the actual world lies at the bottom of our language-games. At one point Wittgenstein even goes so far as to say that the background actually contains facts. After pointing out that it is hard to imagine that we could be wrong in our knowing that water boils and does not freeze under such and such circumstances, he states: "This fact is fused into the foundations of our language-game." (OC, 73, § 558). In another place, Wittgenstein states that "the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts. In that case it would seem as if the language-game must *'show'* the facts that make it possible. (But that is not how it is.)" (OC, 82, §§ 617f).

These passages show that Wittgenstein opposes a view that creates a gap between words and mental episodes on the one side and the objects towards which they are directed on the other. It would be wrong to say that the language-game shows something that is "out there." We cannot separate mental episodes from the facts towards which they are directed, they do not refer to something "out there," on the other side of the gap, so to speak. Our mental life as well as our language-games are conditioned by the facts and objects in our physical environment. If the world were completely different, our mental life and our language-game would be completely different, too. "Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further" - they would "throw me out of the saddle" (OC, 82, § 617ff.) The very possibility of speaking a language or having mental episodes presupposes that facts and objects exist; and we speak the language that we do and have the mental life that we have because of the specific facts that found the basis of our language-games and our mental lives. If these facts were completely different, our language-games and our mental life would be completely different, too.

As a consequence, statements that express a general doubt about the existence of objects, like the sceptic's question "Do physical objects exist?" cannot be formulated meaningfully, since they undermine the very basis of the language-game of which they are part. While it is possible to doubt the existence of particular things like *this* table in front of me, it does not make sense to generalize this doubt to all objects. "If you tried to doubt everything, you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." (OC, 18, § 115). Consequently, metaphysical realism and

idealism are positions that cannot be formulated meaningfully because they try to give an answer to the sceptic's question rather than rejecting it. The same holds for the transcendental assumption according to which we can meaningfully distinguish between the (raw, unstructured) object and the object as it figures in our form of life. This assumption presupposes that we can give a positive answer to the question: "Do objects exist in the way we perceive them?" We can play our language-game only because objects do exist in the way they figure in them; the question thus undermines the basis of our language-games and, more generally, of our form of life. "... a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence ... we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt look like? and don't understand this straight off." (OC, 5, § 24).

This argument allows us to reject a picture according to which there is a gap between mental episodes and the object towards which they are directed. By insisting that facts are at the bottom of our social practices including our language-games we can create an alternative position according to which our mental episodes and our words stand in a direct relation to facts and objects. There is no gap between the episode and its object that has to be bridged in some mysterious way by the intentional relation.

According to this argument we cannot meaningfully distinguish between the world as we see it and the world as it really is. This position allows for local error, for we might misperceive that table over there etc., but there is no space for universal error. We cannot always be wrong, error is possible only before a picture of the world that is largely correct; "Doubt comes *after* belief." (OC, 23, § 160).

In consequence, if Wittgenstein is correct, the world is by and large as we see it. In the example of the imaginary Alpine tribe that I have discussed above, however, we have seen that there can be different forms of life that see the world in different ways. Does that mean that they are seeing a different world or is their - or our - picture of the world just wrong? The answer to both questions is no. They do see the same world, the same objects and facts as we do. These objects and facts are the basis of different social practices and language-games, though. The members of the Alpine tribe, thus, see the objects from a perspective that is very different from ours, but they nonetheless see the same objects. Similarly for the example of chess perception: when I see a rook and my friend sees a wooden figurine, we both see the same object, which *is* a rook and which *is* a wooden figurine. In addition, the fact that the members of the imaginary Alpine tribe interact with the same world and that they have the same sense-organs as we do indicates that their social practices will probably differ less radically from ours than the imagination of some philosophers makes us believe.

As a consequence of this account we realize that we live in a world full of everyday objects. There are rooks, dogs, symphonies, houses, books, and computers etc. All

these objects can be described in different ways. Rather than talking about tables and chairs, we could be talking about micro-particles that are organized in some specific way, for example. This shows only that we can switch from one language game into another, and that the perspective from which we perceive an object depends on the social practices we engage in. It does not mean, however, that only physics can accurately describe our physical environment - what counts as an accurate description rather depends on criteria that are determined by our social practices. Most importantly, it does not mean that there is a raw, unstructured world out there that is in principle inaccessible to us.

## References

- Davidson, Donald (1984) "On the very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" In: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 183-199.
- Dretske, Fred (1981) *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1963) "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" In: *Science, Perception, and Reality*. London: Routledge, 127-196.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1969) *On Certainty*. Ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Transl. by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Wright, Georg Henry von (1982) "Wittgenstein on Certainty" In: *Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 163-182.

## Endnotes

- \* I want to thank Alex Burri, John Gibson, and Sonia Sedivy for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
- 1 Cf. Dretske (1981, 153-168).
- 2 It seems that the full impact of this passage is not always appreciated among Wittgenstein interpreters. Even Georg Henrik von Wright, co-editor of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, distorts this sentence when he quotes it in his article on *On Certainty*. Von Wright uses this quotation in the following sentence: "Their truth 'is fused into the foundations of our language game' (§ 558)..." (von Wright, 1982, 167). Wittgenstein, however, is not writing about the truth-value of some description of a fact, but the very fact itself being fused into the foundations of our language game.