

Perception and Concepts

(A Note on Jocelyn Benoist's Wittgensteinian contextualist "theory" of perception.)

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Abstract

We briefly present Jocelyn Benoist's (2011) Wittgensteinian contextualist approach to perception as we understand it and make some comments. We also make some suggestions about the possibility of its application in epistemology. In particular, we propose to understand any knowledge as in a broad sense "phenomenal".

1. *Intentional realism*

Benoist rejects the metaphysical idea of a "naked reality" as a definite (or indefinite) *Given*, in an absolute sense independent from the subject. He also rejects the classical representationalism according to which the access to reality is possible only by means of a representation which plays a role of a screen between the subject and reality, and keeps reality at a distance from the subject. Metaphysical realism (or the myth of the Given) is the flip side of representationalism. (Benoist 2011, p. 94.)

Benoist develops a Wittgensteinian contextualist approach to reality and representation. Reality is what one has (*ce que l'on a*), not in the sense of possessing or non-possessing it, but in the sense in which one says "let us see what we have" (Benoist 2011, p. 93). "What we have" depends on the context. (In consequence the word "real" has an infinite number of meanings. (Benoist 2011, c. 107.)) The *principle of contextuality* amounts to the principle of intentionality. Benoist's realism is "intentional realism". Intentional realism has two closely related meanings: any genuine intentionality (not pseudo-intentionality) supposes reality in which it is anchored (in this sense the intentionality is real); conversely, any reality is given within a point of view or intention which is not separable from it (in this sense reality is intentional). The identification of a reality within a context or a point of view supposes the application of a norm or concept. Therefore, Benoist's intentional realism is a normative realism. According to Benoist there is no pre-normative, that is, non-conceptual contact with reality. (Benoist 2011, p. 113).

We are part of reality. That is why the metaphor of a contact with reality is not exact. We do not need concepts (or intentionality) to get "access" to reality. We need concepts wherever we try to do something with what we have, that is, with reality: in particular, to identify it, to typify it, to describe it, to "represent" it (not in the sense of classical representationalism), and so on. That being said, no one description of a reality is more "realistic" than others in an absolute sense, though in a given context different descriptions can be more or less

appropriate and more or less adequate (the condition of adequacy is stronger than that of appropriateness; an adequate description is anchored in reality, grasps the reality as it is, in all its concreteness). (Benoist 2011, p. 105.)

2. *The logic of perception*

Benoist rejects the epistemological conception of perception according to which perception is *primary* in the sense that it is a privileged form of access to reality; it *presents* the things. It is said that in a perceptual presentation a thing is given to us as it is.

This point of view depends on the idea of representation. A perceptual presentation would be a limit case of representation. Perception would “show” a reality or, even worse, reality would “show” itself.

However, verification or proving that there is something real is not the logical role of perception. And language, too, in no smaller degree than perception, establishes a relation between us and reality (and at least ordinary language is anchored in perception).

In fact the role of perception is analogous to that of language. Language does not remove us from reality; it *supposes* reality. When we use language in a canonical way we suppose the reality of things. Analogously, when we see things in usual circumstances we suppose their reality.

The idea of a primary character of perception can be reinterpreted. Perception does indeed play a fundamental (primary) role, but this role is *grammatical*, logical, or conceptual. The fact of perception itself constitutes one of the dimensions of the concept of reality. (Benoist 2011, p. 99.) « Parler des choses réelles, c’est toujours, *aussi et d’abord* (même si *pas seulement*), parler des choses que nous voyons, touchons, goûtons, sentons et entendons.» (Benoist 2011, p. 108) (To talk about real things always means, *also* and *first of all* (even if not only), to talk about the things we see, touch, taste, feel, hear. (*My translation.*)) When we point at *real* objects, first of all we point at the things we perceive in the paradigmatic (central) cases. (And we *know* that these things *are*; we *know* that they *exist*.¹) When we do this we do not separate perception and what is perceived, though we do not identify them either. It seems to us that this is how Wittgenstein understands the “ordinary” use of the notion of “reality”.²

This idea can be generalized to “non-ordinary” kinds of reality, such as, for example, the reality of physical facts or mathematical reality. Here is an important insight:

¹ Wittgenstein says: “‘I know’ is there a logical insight. Only realism can’t be proved by means of it’”. (W, *OC*, § 59.)

² Immediate consciousness (awareness) precedes perception. It allows us to grasp reality as it is, in all its concreteness, even more than perception. By contrast, thought belongs to a higher level of consciousness than perception (or experience). A thought about an experience makes it meaningful; the two can be temporally separated. This distinction between the levels of consciousness is not grammatical.

« (...) Les modèles mathématiques de la physique ne valent qu'en vertu de leur prétention référentielle, prétention qu'ils articulent suivant une modalité *sui generis*, qui est celle de l'*approximation*, et que celle-ci va à quelque chose qui, dans son principe, est « réel » au même sens où l'est ce qui est expérimenté dans la perception. En ce sens-là, la « chose physique » n'est ni plus, ni moins réelle que la « chose perçue ». » (Benoist 2011, p. 107)

The mathematical models of physics count only in virtue of their referential pretention. They articulate it according to a modality *sui generis* which is that of *approximation*. The latter refers to something which, at its core, is “real” in the same sense as that which is experienced in perception. In this sense a “physical reality” is neither more nor less real than the “thing perceived”. (*My translation.*)

I propose to interpret this thought by Benoist about how mathematics describes the physical world in pragmatic terms, or in terms of Wittgenstein's rule-following problem. In general, a “gap” between a concept, a mathematical model or a physical theory, which I propose to interpret as a Wittgensteinian rule, and “reality” is closed pragmatically, that is, in a broad sense phenomenologically.³ (See also § 4 below.)

The grammatical approach to perception allows correction of the following two views about perception: projectivism and metaphysical phenomenology.

According to projectivism, phenomenological properties are subjective. They are effects produced by objective physical properties on the subject in different circumstances. So, they depend on the circumstances and the subject's point of view. Projectivism is easily rejected with the help of examples. For example, the red signal of a traffic light does not depend on the point of view of a driver or the circumstances. It is objective.

By contrast, the classical phenomenology of Husserl considers phenomenal properties to be real in the same sense in which metaphysical realism considers objects of the exterior world to be real, that is, affirms the existence of a phenomenological reality as a thesis. This is, strictly speaking, false. According to Benoist, the existence of objects and their phenomenological properties is not a physical or phenomenological, but a grammatical (logical) fact. The use of phenomenological predicates supposes the existence of objects and their phenomenological properties.

We know a lot of things by means of perception. But perceptual experience as such is neither true nor false. It is not knowledge, but it makes knowledge possible, it gives access to knowledge. What can be true or false (for example, in the case of so-called perceptual illusions) is a characterization, or “description”, of a perceptual experience. That being said, a description of a perceived thing is not unique - it depends on the context - and, in a given context, it can be more or less adequate. (Benoist 2011, p. 102.)

³ We take it that the pragmatic act (theoretical (cognitive) or practical (action)), that is, an act within a certain practice, is an “experience” in a broad sense (*Erfahrung* in the Hegelian sense). It is also a phenomenological act in a broad sense, that is, in the sense of the phenomenology of Heidegger. Introspection of this act is analogous to perception.

3. *Phenomenological reality of perception and perceptual illusions*

In the case of the famous Zöllner illusion, the parallel lines seem to be unparallel. A false characterization of this perceptual experience is as follows: “These lines are unparallel”. The experience itself, however, is neither true nor false. It can be truly characterized as an experience of unparallel lines (which, in reality, are parallel). The proposition “This perceptual experience is an experience of unparallel lines” is a true proposition about the *experience*, or phenomenological reality, not the physical reality.

The phenomenological reality is not less real than the physical reality and has its own normativity. One can characterize it with the help of concepts. For instance, if we said that our perceptual experience is an *experience* of parallel lines, using the standard phenomenological notion of a straight line which supposes the law of perspective, we would make a mistake. One could avoid the mistake if we used the notion of a straight line in a paradoxical way, describing the Zöllner illusion as an experience of “unparallel parallels”.

On the other hand, one could generalize the (phenomenological) concept of a parallel line to apply to the case of the Zöllner illusion, that is, to the case of the corresponding phenomenology. The lines observed in the Zöllner illusion would be parallel in the generalized sense. (The notion of a line would obtain a new use.) Such a generalized notion of a line would not lead to paradoxes.

This is an example of a general phenomenon of the projection of a notion to a new context and, correspondingly, its generalization.

Quantum mechanics gives a historical example. Within the so-called “old quantum mechanics”, new quantum phenomena were formulated in a non-appropriate classical language. This inevitably led to conceptual paradoxes. For instance, they used the classical commutative notions of coordinates and momentum. The problem was that in quantum mechanics a particle cannot simultaneously have coordinates and momentum in the classical sense. In matrix quantum mechanics by Heisenberg these notions were generalized. Quantum coordinates and momentum are non-commutative operators.

4. *Perception and Knowledge*

As is well known, the classical definition of knowledge as true justified belief is “refuted” by the Gettier cases, which are those of true justified beliefs whose truth is accidental. Such beliefs cannot be considered as knowledge. To exclude the Gettier cases, the classical definition of knowledge is completed by the condition that the truth of a belief is non-accidental.

I suggest considering knowledge as the result of a pragmatic closing of the “gap” between a (rational) justification of a belief and its truth, or the corresponding fact (or knowledge).⁴ The implicit or explicit justification, or *reasons*, would play the role of the (epistemic) Wittgensteinian rule. The classical definition is true: knowledge is true justified belief. The additional condition of non-accidentality of truth (or no-Gettier-problem condition) is redundant. The Gettier cases belong to those where there is a gap between the epistemic rule and reality (knowledge).

The pragmatic act of the application of a rule, or concept, is analogous to the act of perception in a broad sense.⁵ So any knowledge can be viewed as in a broad sense phenomenal.⁶

In terms of the epistemology of disjunctivism (Pritchard 2012), we interpret what has been said above as follows: if the epistemic gap between a justified belief and the corresponding knowledge is closed, then there are *factive reasons* accessible to reflection, that is, reasons which entail the corresponding fact. In the Gettier cases, in the case of hallucination, in the case of the presence of undefeated defeater (Pritchard 2012), for example, there are no factive reasons which are accessible to reflection.

Let us suppose that we are looking at a zebra which is in fact a cleverly disguised mule (we do not know this) and all epistemic conditions are good. Let us also suppose that there is a hidden real zebra behind the mule. Our belief that there is a zebra in front of us will be true and (in a sense) justified, but it will not be knowledge. This is a Gettier case.

It is obvious that in this case there is a causal “gap” between the real zebra and us. We do not have any access to the real zebra. One can even argue that in reality our belief that there is a zebra in front of us is not true, since in reality we are not looking at a zebra, but at a disguised mule, that is, strictly speaking there is a mule in front of us, not a zebra. One can also argue that what we take to be a justification that there is a zebra in front of us is not really a justification, because there is no causal connection between it and the real zebra. Only in the case where there is no gap between a belief as a mental state and the corresponding fact (or truth) is it fully justified, and there are factive reasons accessible to reflection.

So, the suggestion is that knowledge is the correct, or successful (in the pragmatic sense) epistemic judgment. The role of the epistemic rule is played by the justification of (or factive reasons for) the corresponding belief.

References

Benoist, J. 2010/2011. *Concepts*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.

⁴ In this case “I know” is not a logical insight (see footnote 1).

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ In a recent paper, Delan Smithies argues that any epistemic justification is based on a phenomenal consciousness (Smithies 2012). This is an agreement with our proposal.

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