The Content/Object Equivocation: Shepherd’s Neglected Contribution

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Overview

- Between Shepherd and Searle
- The ‘Bad Argument’
- Searle’s critique of Berkeley
- Shepherd on Berkeley’s error
- Comparing Shepherd and Searle
- Shepherd on external objects
- Philosophical neglect of Shepherd

With Sal Atticum corn’d,
With Paper-Spice pepper’d
With Book-Garnish adorn’d—
Enter Lady Mary Shepheard—
*Imbued* with a Taste—
*Imblued* with a Colour

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1833*
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Between Shepherd and Searle

• Kazimierz Twardowski ‘s *On the Content and Object of Presentations*

• Influence on Meinong’s ontology

• Husserl’s theory of intentionality

• GEM Anscombe’s ‘The Intentionality of Sensation’
The ‘Bad Argument’

[T]here are different versions of the Bad Argument, but the common feature that runs through them is the confusion between the intentional sense of “aware of,” and other such expressions, and the constitutive sense of the same expressions. The essence of the Bad Argument is to treat the experience itself as the object, or possible object, of perceptual awareness in the sense in which real objects in the world when perceived are the objects of awareness.

Searle, 2015
The ‘Bad Argument’

• Mistaken scepticism about our knowledge of the nature of the external world
• Crucial error of the ‘Bad Argument’ is the claim that we perceive sense data—failure to distinguish content (sense data) and object (external, mind-independent entity)

The Bad Argument is an instance of a very general fallacy about intentionality, and it results from confusion about the very nature of intentionality. It is confusion between the content of an intentional state and the object of the intentional state.

Searle, 2015
Searle’s critique of Berkeley

“[S]ensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense”.

*Philonus*: Upon putting your hand near the fire, do you perceive one simple uniform sensation or two distinct sensations?

*Hylas*: But one simple sensation.

*Philonous*: Is not the heat immediately perceived?

*Hylas*: It is.

*Philonous*: And the pain?

*Hylas*: True.

*Philonous*: Seeing therefore they are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived and the pain; and, consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain.

*Berkeley, 1713*
Searle’s critique of Berkeley

- Ambiguity of the term “immediately perceived”:
  1. Object of the perception; intentional sense; objective state of the world
  2. Content of the perception: constitutive sense; subjective experience
Searle’s critique of Berkeley

• Ambiguity of the term “immediately perceived”:
  1. Object of the perception; intentional sense; objective state of the world
  2. Content of the perception: constitutive sense; subjective experience

• We may still be brains–in–vats, but we aren’t subject to scepticism about the true nature of the external world
Searle’s critique of Berkeley

The sceptical argument says all you can ever perceive are your own experiences, so how do you know there is a reality on the other side of those experiences? On the account of perception that I have been presenting [...], the relation of perception is one of direct presentation. We do not have evidence or make an inference, we directly see objects and states of affairs around us.

*Searle, 2015*
Searle’s critique of Berkeley

- Wittgenstein’s distinction between:
  - Inferences from evidence
  - Identification of criteria satisfaction
For what are the forementioned Objects but the things we perceive by Sense, and what do we perceive besides our own Ideas or Sensations?

Berkeley, 1710

Ambiguity of “ideas being imprinted on the senses” / “perceiving [by sense] our own ideas and sensations”
For in this sentence “what are objects but the things we perceive by sense?” and “what do we perceive but our ideas and sensations?” there is an offence against one of the plainest and most useful of logical rules; for the argument if placed in a regular syllogism, will be seen to contain a middle term of two different and particular significations from which, therefore, nothing can be concluded.

Shepherd, 1827
Let the question be, “Are objects, ideas and sensations only?” and the middle term, “The things we perceive”—be united with the predicate for the major proposition, and then be altered: to “the things we perceive by sense,” when joined to the subject, for the minor; it will be seen that an inconclusive syllogism is thence formed. For if the major proposition stands, “Our ideas and sensations, are the only things we perceive,” and the minor, “Objects are the things we perceive by sense,” the conclusion, viz. “Therefore objects are only our ideas and sensations,” does not logically follow, because the middle term would then consist of “two different parts, or kinds, of the same universal idea,” i.e. the idea of perception in general; “and this will never serve to show whether the subject and predicate agree, or disagree.

Shepherd, 1827
Shepherd on Berkeley’s error

1. Our ideas and sensations are the only things we perceive.
2. Objects are the things we perceive by sense.

Therefore,  3. Objects are only our ideas and sensations.
Shepherd on Berkeley’s error

1. Our ideas and sensations are the only things we perceive.
2. Objects are the things we perceive by sense.
3. Therefore, Objects are only our ideas and sensations.

Paraphrase:

1. Our perceptions are composed of nothing but ideas and sensations.
2. We perceive objects by means of our senses.

Therefore, 3. Objects consist of nothing but our ideas and sensations.
Comparing Shepherd and Searle

Shepherd

• Knowledge of the external, mind-independent world
• Known through reasoning from the relative proportions and variety of sensations, which reveal the corresponding relative proportions and variety amongst external objects
Comparing Shepherd and Searle

Shepherd

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The *objects of sense*, therefore, [...] are known [...] to be the *continued, exterior, and independant existences* of external nature, exciting ideas, and determining sensations in the mind of a sentient being; but not only to be *ideas and sensations*.

*Shepherd, 1827*
Comparing Shepherd and Searle

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- Knowledge of the external, mind-independent world
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Searle

- Knowledge of the external, mind-independent world
- Known through direct perception

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Shepherd, 1827
[T]he soul does truly in a sense perceive outward things, as they are when existing outwardly, for after reason shews that the qualities of things, in a state of perception, cannot be like them out of a state of perception, yet being conscious that sensation is only a simple act, (a power, a quality,) it perceives by the understanding that the varieties of things are in relation to each other outwardly in the same proportion as are the inward sensations.

Shepherd, 1827
Shepherd on external objects

I observe that reason discovering these objects to be in their relation to each other, as various as the impressions they convey; also perceives them to be in one respect like the ideas they create; i.e. in the same proportions and bearings to each other, outwardly as they are inwardly. Therefore among the observations we have of “our ideas and sensations” of sensible qualities, we do perceive something else than these mere “ideas or sensations” for we perceive by reason, that those things which must needs be present in order as causes to affect the sense, may on account of their variety, their similar distinctness, and proportions, be named, (when considered as existing exterior to the instruments of sense,) by the names they bear when inwardly taken notice of.

Shepherd, 1827

The logical error, therefore, of Bishop Berkeley on this part of the subject, is an incomplete definition; for no definition is good which does not take notice of all the ideas, under the term; and in every object of sense which the mind perceives, the knowledge of its genus, as a general effect arising from a general cause independant of mind, is mixed with the sensations or ideas resulting from its special qualities affecting the same. The notion of this genus is omitted in Dr. Berkeley’s definition of an object.

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*Shepherd, 1827*
Shepherd on external objects

- Atherton critiques Shepherd’s material conception of the senses
- But Berkeley establishes the nature of objects as collections of sensible qualities using the equivocation Shepherd has rejected.
Shepherd on external objects

- Atherton critiques Shepherd’s material conception of the senses
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Philonous: [...] sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense. [...] Sensible things therefore are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combinations of sensible qualities?

Berkely, 1713
Shepherd on external objects

When, for instance, they ["children or peasants", by which she means to refer to ordinary, non-philosophical thinkers] perceive a fire in their chamber, they know that the cause of this perception possesses also the capacity of setting fire to the house, but none of setting fire to the idea of a house; they consequently place a guard against the action of that cause, but none over their thoughts of it.

Shepherd, 1827
Shepherd on external objects

- The variety and difference amongst them is left over after we strip away all their sensible characteristics.
- Mind-independent external objects serve as the causal origin of our sensations and ideas of them.
- Berkeley’s argument for other minds serves as an example of how we can gain knowledge of things outside our own minds by observing their effects.
Shepherd on external objects

• The variety and difference amongst them is left over after we strip away all their sensible characteristics
• Mind-independent external objects serve as the causal origin of our sensations and ideas of them
• Berkeley’s argument for other minds serves as an example of how we can gain knowledge of things outside our own minds by observing their effects

[A] object perceived by the mind is a compound being, consisting of a certain collection of sensible qualities, “mixed with an idea the result of reasoning” of such qualities being formed by a “continually existing outward and independant [sic] set of as various and appropriate causes;” therefore [...] there must be “an outward object,” existing as a cause to excite the inward feeling.

Shepherd, 1827
Shepherd on external objects

- Atherton objects that Shepherd hasn’t adequately grasped Berkeley’s claim of direct experience of non-material causation
- But Atherton may be argued not to fully appreciate the significance of Shepherd’s rejection of the content/object equivocation
Philosophical neglect of Shepherd


“There are great acuteness and subtlety displayed in these metaphysical works.” —Blakey’s Hist. of Philos. of Mind, iv. 40, (q. v.)

See, also, Fraser’s Mag., v. 697.

Shepherd, R. Vulgar Arithmetic, Lon., 1759, 12mo.

Shepherd, R. H. Gathering of Fifty Years;

Alibone, 1897
Philosophical neglect of Shepherd

When she undertook a public refutation of these erroneous notions on cause and effect, it must be remembered it was a time when they were most rampant, and widely spread over the northern parts of Britain in particular. Every young man who came from the Universities of Scotland, attempted to show off his subtility [sic] and academic lore, by denying there was any real causation in the world; all was mere imagination, and a piece of gross vulgar credulity. Her Ladyship's efforts were, therefore, well-timed; and there is no doubt but their influence was decided in giving a considerable check to these illogical and dangerous opinions."

Blakey, 1850
Philosophical neglect of Shepherd

Of the writers since Hume, who have written on metaphysics with the severity proper to the subject, are Mr. Fearne, the author of the Essay on ‘Consciousness,’ and Lady Mary Shepherd, whose works on ‘Cause and Effect’ are amongst the most remarkable productions of the age. Beattie, Dugald Stewart, Dr. Brown, and his imitators, turned what should have been abstract reasoning “to favor and to prettiness.” Mr. Hazlitt obscured it by thickly-clustered associations; and Coleridge presented it in the masquerade of a gorgeous fancy. Lady Mary Shepherd, on the other hand, is a thinker of as much honesty as courage; her speculations are colorless, and leave nothing on the mind but the fine-drawn lines of thought. Coleridge, addressing the Duchess of Devonshire, on a spirited verse she had written on the heroism of Tell, asks—

“O lady, nursed in pomp and pleasure,
Where got ye that heroic measure?”

The poet might have found in the reasonings of Lady Mary Shepherd a worthier object of admiration than in the little stanza which seemed so extraordinary an effort for a lady of fashion.


