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Item Type	Journal article
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DOI	https://doi.org/10.17454/pam-2214
Publisher	Rosenberg and Sellier
Rights	CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
Download date	2024-12-13 00:12:32
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/14016

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MANY PROPERTY PROBLEM¹

abstract

One of the most influential traditional objections to Adverbialism about perceptual experience is that posed by Frank Jackson's 'many property problem'. Perhaps largely because of this objection, few philosophers now defend Adverbialism. We argue, however, that the essence of the many property problem arises for all of the leading metaphysical theories of experience: all leading theories must simply take for granted certain facts about experience, and no theory looks well positioned to explain the facts in a straightforward way. Because of this, the many property problem isn't on its own a good reason for rejecting Adverbialism; and nor is it a puzzle that will decide amongst the other leading theories.

keywords

Perception; Intentionality; Adverbialism; Intentionalism; Naive realism; Propositional attitudes; Content, Physicalism.

¹ Thank you to the audience at the 2021 San Raffaele School of Philosophy "Mind, Language, and the First-Person Perspective" conference and two anonymous referees for comments that helped clarify the paper. Thank you also to the "Lockdown Adverbialism Group" – Justin D'Ambrosio, Laura Gow, Kati Farkas, and David Papineau – for comments on an earlier draft and to Frances Egan for feedback and encouragement. Finally, thank you to Jeff Speaks and Michael Tye for helpful conversations in the early stages.

- 1. Introduction** According to the Adverbialist theory of perception, perceptual experience isn't a relation. Traditionally, the view was advanced as a thesis about how to analyze the language of perceptual reports. On the face of it, 'Frank is perceptually experiencing a red object' seems to ascribe a relation between Frank and some red object. But in the light of familiar concerns raised by experientially indistinguishable illusions and hallucinations, the object to which Frank is related must not be an ordinary object. Rather, it must be a red sense-datum, a Meinongian object, or something else that could be present in 'bad cases' (hallucination, illusion) as well as 'good cases' (genuine perception). Adverbialists aim to avoid commitment to such things while providing a uniform account of experiences, and so they deny that the ascription reports a real relation. 'Frank is perceptually experiencing a red object' should then be 'analyzed' or understood as equivalent to 'Frank is perceptually experiencing redly'. The latter sentence describes Frank's experience in terms of a way of experiencing rather than in terms of an experiential relation to an object. These days, Adverbialism is usually treated as being of purely historical significance. One reason for this is the view that Frank Jackson's 'many property problem' poses an unanswerable objection to the theory. We argue here that the essence of this problem applies to all theories of perceptual experience, and so is not a problem specifically for Adverbialism. Our aim in pointing this out is not to defend Adverbialism, but rather to draw attention to a general problem for all theories of experience.
- 2. Adverbialism** Although it was formulated (by Chisholm, 1957 and others) as a linguistic thesis, Adverbialism is perhaps best understood as a metaphysical thesis about perceptual experience: experiences are non-relational modifications of the mind (see Kriegel, 2011).¹ If they are right, Adverbialists are well positioned to give a uniform account of veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory experiences without appealing to non-ordinary objects. Frank Jackson (1977) raised a powerful objection to Adverbialism, which has become known as the 'many property problem'. Jackson argued that Adverbialists face a dilemma: either they fail to distinguish clearly distinct experiences, or they fail to respect obvious entailments. Consider the following:

¹ Additional discussions of Adverbialism can be found in Ducasse (1940), Hare (1969), Kriegel (2007; 2008) Mendelovici (2018), Papineau (2014), and Sellars (1969).

(1) Frank is experiencing a red square and a green circle.

(2) Frank is experiencing a red circle and a green square.

On the face of it, Adverbialists must say that the conditions under which (1) is true are the same as the conditions under which (2) is true. In linguistic terms, both are regimented as ‘Frank is experiencing red-ly and square-ly and green-ly and circle-ly’. Since conjunction is commutative, the charge is that Adverbialists fail to distinguish these two cases.

One solution is to ‘fuse’ the properties that cluster together (the colors and shapes in this case) so that the needed distinction between (1) and (2) can be drawn. So, in the case just described, the Adverbialist might appeal to the fused properties of *experiencing red-square-ly* and *experiencing red-circle-ly* respectively. But as Jackson points out, we now find ourselves hooked on the other horn of the dilemma. From the fact that one is experiencing a red square, it follows that one is experiencing red; and from the fact that one is experiencing a green circle, it follows that one is experiencing green. But these entailments fail on the fusion view. Because the ‘fused’ adverbs are syntactically simple (which is supposed to reflect the existence of wholly distinct properties or distinct ways a mind can be modified), there seems to be no way to recover the property of *experiencing-red-ly* from the property of *experiencing red-square-ly*. So, the Adverbialist either fails to differentiate distinct experiences, or fails to capture obvious entailments about experience.

The Adverbialist can respond as follows. When faced with (1) and (2), Adverbialists should ‘fuse’ the properties, but when faced with the obvious entailments, they should say it is simply a metaphysical fact that *experiencing red-round-ly* entails *experiencing red-ly*. This fact does not admit of a further explanation: it is simply a brute fact about the way perceptual experience works. Although this is perhaps the best response for the Adverbialist, it is hard not to see it as an unsatisfyingly *ad hoc* stipulation. This is a powerful reason to reject Adverbialism. Adverbialism undergenerates distinctions or undergenerates correct inferences and with nowhere else to turn, Adverbialists look forced to simply take for granted certain facts about experience without explanation. For many philosophers (though not Jackson, 1977), intentionalism about experience presents itself as an attractive alternative.²

According to Intentionalism, perceptual experiences are intentional or representational states. **3. Intentionalism**

On the usual versions of this view (Byrne, 2001; Tye, 1995), Frank’s experiencing something red consists in Frank standing in a relation to a propositional content. Frank is visually representing (e.g.) that there is something red and is therefore related to the content *that something is red*.

Contents themselves stand in entailment relations and it may seem that this fact makes Intentionalism invulnerable to the many-property problem. First, with respect to the difference between (1) and (2), Intentionalists offer the following:

(1) Frank is experiencing a red square and a green circle.

(1’) Frank is visually representing that there is something red and square and something green and circular.

(2) Frank is experiencing a red circle and a green square.

(2’) Frank is visually representing that there is something red and circular and something green and square.

² For further responses see D’Ambrosio (2019), Kriegel (2011), and Tye (1989). For further complications see Dinges (2015), Grzankowski (2018), and Woodling (2016).

This approach treats the contents of experience as ‘general’ contents; the usual approach employs distinct bound variables that will ‘hold’ the properties together in the right ways to distinguish (1) and (2). (It is also possible to treat the contents of experience as singular; nothing we say below turns on this decision.)

Intentionalists also seem to have a simple way to explain the entailment from experiencing something red and round to experiencing something red. On the face of it, the fact that the content *that there is something red and round* entails the content *that there is something red* provides our explanation.

But despite the obvious appeal of this move, things cannot be this simple. To see why, consider the relation an experiencer bears to a content according to Intentionalists, variously labelled in the literature – Alex Byrne (2009) calls it the relation of ‘ex-ing’ and Adam Pautz (2010) calls it ‘sensorily entertaining’. Now suppose that it is entailments among contents that explain the relationships between experiences. The problem is that there are many other entailments that contents themselves have, which have no bearing on the relevant experiences at all. For example, the content *that there is something red* entails *that there is something red and 2+2=4*. But it makes little sense to suppose that this entailment could be reflected in someone’s perceptual experience.

Intentionalists now face a dilemma. In order to avail themselves of the relations among contents to capture the obvious relations between experiences, they must appeal to entailment. But in order to block irrelevant entailments, they must deny that sensorily entertaining is closed under entailment. But if sensorily entertaining is not closed under entailment, how can Intentionalists use the usual notion of entailment as an independent explanation of the relations between experiences?

It is a familiar fact that not all intentional relations are closed under entailment. In other words, just because the content of one’s representational state entails some other content, it does not follow that one is thereby in a representational state with the entailed content. Consider some examples. The proposition that Henry and Craig join the party entails that Henry joins the party. But I might hope that Henry and Craig join the party even though I do not hope that Henry alone joins the party. I might like their joint company but prefer them not to come to the party at all if they aren’t coming together. Or here is another: the content that the ball is on the table entails the content that something is on the table. But someone who consciously judges that the ball is on the table needn’t thereby judge that there is something on the table. In light of the first judgement it would be rational to make the second judgement (and so perhaps one *should* make it), but they needn’t make it. They might be too lazy, too tired, pressed for time; or they might simply lack the ability to make a judgement with a quantified content.

An Intentionalist can nonetheless insist that the relationships between experiencing something red and round and experiencing something red, for example, are explained by specific entailments between the specific experiential contents of the relevant perceptual states. But now they seem to be very much in the company of the Adverbialist who insists that there are brute metaphysical relations holding amongst non-relational experiences. Intentionalists, it should be noted, face a problem of overgeneration rather than undergeneration (as faced by the Adverbialism), but the essence of the problem is the same. Intentionalists look forced to simply take for granted certain facts about experience without explanation. Granted, the Intentionalist won’t need to posit a new metaphysically brute fact for each and every desired connection between states – their basic resource is just the familiar relation of entailment. But we still need an explanation of why we can appeal to entailment to explain some connections between experiences, while denying that entailment relations between contents are reflected in all such connections. The appeal to bruteness remains a

problem.

In other words, Intentionalists and Adverbialists both need an explanation of what we might call the ‘laws of appearance’: why some contents must hang together and others do not.³

But this was the heart of the original many properties problem: why is it that someone who experiences something red and round *must* also experience something red? If this is a problem, it seems to be a problem for Intentionalism just as it was for Adverbialism. We charged the Adverbialist with appealing to an unsatisfyingly *ad hoc* stipulation; now a similar charge can be laid against the Intentionalist.

On the face of it, relational (or ‘act-object’) theories may seem immune to this problem, since the facts about experienced properties are explained in terms of facts about the properties of objects experienced: someone who experiences something red and round must also experience something red, simply because the object which is red and round is also red.

But matters are not so simple. For on a Naive Realist form of the relational theory, objects have in addition many unexperienced properties, and for this reason such a theory also owes an account of the laws of appearance. For example, a red and round object also has invisible microscopic properties which are not experienced. Perceivers do not stand in the relevant perceptual relation to all properties of the perceived object, only those which can perceptually appear in experience. So the same question arises: why do some experienced properties of the experienced object hang together in experience and some do not?

By contrast, a Sense-Datum theorist holds that the objects of experience have exactly the properties they are experienced as having. It might seem that this theory does avoid the many properties problem, as we have formulated it. But in fact the problem trails not far behind. Ask yourself: which properties do the objects of sensing have? The obvious answer is: only those which are *experienced* as hanging together. The Sense-Datum theory, like the other theories, presupposes the laws of appearance – the facts about how experienced properties hang together.

If this is right, then all the leading metaphysical theories of perception encounter the challenge that lies within the many property problem: in order to describe experience correctly, they all have to appeal to facts about how experienced properties are connected, and then find space in their theories to accommodate those facts. The classical Adverbialist approach is to appeal to brute metaphysical facts about ways experiences are modified; the Intentionalist has to restrict the entailment relations between contents in a way that captures only the relations between experienced properties; the Naive Realist has to rule out relations to the unexperienced properties of ordinary objects; and the Sense-Data theory constructs experienced objects with precisely those properties which are related in the way they are experienced.

All these theories of perception take for granted facts about the ways in which experienced properties hang together; and all of them propose more-or-less *ad hoc* explanations of these facts. Looked at in this way, the many property problem will not, on its own, decide between philosophical theories of perception. Rather, it is something that exposes a quite general characteristic of these theories: their reliance on the laws of appearance.

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³ The term ‘laws of appearance’ is due to McGinn (1983). The problem has also been recently discussed by Pautz (n.d.; 2017) who also appreciates that the problem is faced by many theorists.

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