“Observation Reconsidered” Reconsidered: Theory-Ladenness and the Epistemic Charge of Norm-Sensitive Aliefs

Fodor’s (1984) “Observation Reconsidered” defended the theory-neutrality of observation; in this paper, I will reassess Fodor’s modularity-informed conclusions in light of two elements of more recent epistemology: Susanna Siegel’s (2017) notion of ‘epistemic charge’ and the implicit attitudes described by Alex Madva and Michael Brownstein (2012) as “norm-sensitive aliefs.” Altogether, though I affirm Fodor’s distinction between ‘observation’ and ‘perceptual fixation of belief,’ I deny that this disjunction preserves the sort of neutrality that Fodor (along with Granny) desires.

Firstly, Fodor ultimately affirms that perception does function as a kind of inference, albeit one that is fundamentally encapsulated from all background beliefs; when Britta looks into her microscope, the beliefs she affixes as a result of her perception might be corruptible, but the specific percepts are not, given their modular isolation from Britta’s theoretical commitments. This sort of experientialism treats sensations as basic beliefs not in need of justification, but a host of work on the “myth of the given” has raised important doubts about this sort of foundationalism; in particular, Jack Lyons’ (2008) reliabilist solution to the Sellarsian dilemma suggests that Fodor’s treatment of sensation as an evidential justifier for beliefs is ultimately irrelevant if nonevidential justifiers (like process-reliability) truly ground belief-justification.

But let’s say that Fodor is right about the objectivity of sensations: if so, then Siegel’s introduction of ‘epistemic charge’ as an additional type of status held by experiences threatens his position considerably. According to Siegel, epistemic charge is a sui generis property which is positively or negatively valenced and can, on its own, contribute to an agent’s rational standing; consequently, even if sensation M lacks justification, it might possess positive epistemic charge which will be transmitted to any belief B based on M, thereby allowing an agent to rationally hold B. In this way, epistemic charge can be construed as a measurement heuristic for evidence: it wraps something like nonevidential justification around evidentially-unjustified experiences. However, this entails that Fodor’s treatment of sensation as epistemically incorruptible is insufficient for ensuring theory-neutrality: even if M is somehow basic, its potentially negative epistemic charge calls the objectivity of any subsequent B into question.

Nevertheless, Fodor’s concern about the intractability of familiar perceptual illusions remains important: why can’t justified belief in the truth of the lines in the Muller-Lyer illusion override our perceptual experience, negatively-charged as it may be? To this, I adapt the distinction between personal-level beliefs and subpersonal aliefs.

Although Tamar Gendler’s (2008a, 2008b) initial outline of aliefs presented them as arational, subconscious elements of our cognitive architecture, further work on the category of implicit mental states has developed the concept in a variety of ways. According to Madva and Brownstein’s diachronic construal of the mechanism, aliefs do not automatically link perceptual information to behavioral response (as in Gendler’s model), but rather function to provoke “tension” which can motivate an agent’s response - that is to say, action is a potential, but not necessary, result of norm-sensitive aliefs (NSAs).
Madva and Brownstein give the example of a museum-goer who stands too close to a painting: the person might not know exactly how far she should stand from the painting (in terms of a discrete distance value she could state if asked), but the tension she feels from viewing the painting improperly will motivate her to reposition herself to a less-uncomfortable distance; in this way the museum-goer’s NSAs guide her action so as to modulate her perception.

In short, I propose a reliabilist assessment of NSAs wherein they can either be ideal or nonideal, with world-accuracy as the determining factor for the former; I then connect the sort of tension provoked by ideal NSAs to negatively-valenced epistemic charges. Consequently, depending on the scope of NSA functionality, any observation - including those from Britta’s microscope - could feasibly provoke such tension, thereby casting the rationality of such observations into potential doubt. The fact that the Muller-Lyer illusion persists despite our knowledge of its true nature could result from the cooptation of ideal NSAs regarding depth perception, size constancy, and the like, under unusual conditions. Unfortunately for Fodor, this means that observation functions in a manner not-sufficiently-dissimilar to belief-fixation - when he admits that the latter cannot claim to be theory-neutral, he must likewise admit the same of the former.

References