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Bleeding the Vat

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

Bleeding the Vat

By Mark Stahl

Descartes has a problem. He did such a good job at separating mind from body that when asked to resolve their interaction he fell back to a biological answer. Needless to say his answer was less than adequate. The challenges offered by dualism have yet to be resolved and I am going to make no attempt to resolve them in the writing below. What I am going to do is propose a way in which we could begin looking at these challenges in a slightly different manner. Let us begin simply.

Hopefully we agree that we do not perceive color on objects. Physiologically speaking our eyes transduce waves of light, and we feel as if we perceive color directly. At the end of this transduction, our mind passes judgment on the information received: "I recognize this bit of information to be color x." This would imply color to be a mental attribute of a physical object. But where is this interpretation taking place? Classically we have

put these mental activities within the mind, and we have associated the mind with the brain, and the brain is spatially located within the head. This would imply that the mind has a physical location, but the mind is not a physical entity and therefore has no spatial properties.

When experiencing the daisy, and more specifically the color of the daisy, I don't see the color in my head. The color I am experiencing appears to be located 'out there', outside my body, and more appropriately, it seems to be attributed to the flower itself. But how is this possible? Color is perceived in the mind (being a mental attribute), and the mind is classically associated with the brain (which is located in the head), therefore any observations of color should in turn be viewed within the head. So why am I seeing yellow 'out there' and not 'in here' (in the head)?

What if we were to assume that the mind, our consciousness, our subjectivity, was not located within our head but was located 'outside' of us, 'around' us? This could

easily explain why we are able to experience yellow 'out there'. We are directly observing our subjectivity of a physical phenomenon. But before we start trying to validate this hypothesis, let's embellish it a little more.

Imagine a dot in the center of a circle, the dot we shall call 'the center of relevance', which is your physical body, and the circle is your consciousness. It should be stated, for clarity's sake, that consciousness is not a circle, it is most likely some dynamic, oddly shaped, polygon with experiential blind spots; nevertheless, a circle is good enough for our purposes. Now let us place our daisy within the circle of consciousness and represent it with a cross. Next draw a circle around the cross. This represents our subjectivity in regards to the physical daisy; this is what we directly experience. This also helps us clarify how it is we are able to have feelings and make judgments about occurrences outside of our range of perception: each object is merely another cross lying in our range of consciousness and wrapped

with our subjectivity, which in turn we are observing (though it should be noted that I am not sure exactly as to how we directly observe these conscious phenomenon, I merely assuming that it does happen).

So let us recap the process of experiencing the yellowness of the daisy's petals. Light (as energy waves or particles) shines bright on the daisy's petals and reflects off of them. The reflected energy waves are now the frequency of yellow within the visible spectrum. Since we are observing the daisy, our subjectivity is wrapping the flower, and hence the waves bounce off of the petals and shine through our subjective filter. When experiencing the yellowness of the daisy, we are experiencing our subjectivity concerning the physical object, and not the object itself.

Now we have a possible dilemma. Since we are directly observing our subjectivity in regards to physical objects, is it possible to trust any experience we have of a physical object to be true to reality? At this point, being that I am only able to experience the world through my five senses (and other senses if they exist) I would have to honestly (albeit depressingly) say that any experience I have must first

be considered an interpretation of true reality since I am not completely aware of any limitations placed on my senses (such as color blindness, or partial deafness, or many others). So, in order to make an honest judgment of our experiences, we must first accept that what we are observing is not what is real. So how do we begin, and continue understanding the physical reality surrounding us?

When a scientist proposes a new hypothesis, usually in the form of a paper in a scientific journal, this hypothesis is taken by other scientists who make an attempt to reproduce the same experiment outlined in the paper, in hopes of achieving the same or, in the case of disproving the hypothesis, largely differing results. This does not happen once, or over a short period of time. Usually a hypothesis is tested more times than I would be willing to count before it is taken as (at least partial) truth. The same goes for any observations concerning the objective attributes of physical objects, such as atomic mass. One scientist experimentally acquires the data, publishes, and then the experiment is reproduced many times until a large number of individuals within the community agree with the proposed theory. This

provides us with an answer to the question how we understand the physical reality surrounding us. What makes the proposal ("that what we are observing is not what is real") nice is that this is how things are already done. There is no need to change how it is we discover things about the world.

Please Join Us for Discussion on Wednesday, March 29 at 4:30 in Gamble 213.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, or would like to write a brief article for the *Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either Mary Culp or Dr. Nordenhaug.

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