

Gavin David Young Lecture Series 2012

Philosophy for Representationalists

Perceptual experiences represent the way things are. For instance, visual perceptual experiences typically represent how things are in front of us, and tactual experiences represent how things are at a point of contact between our bodies and objects external to us. They are, in consequence, marvelous sources of information about how things are. We can pass this information on in many ways, but we humans most often pass it on using words and sentences.

What do these commonplaces about experiences and language tell us about the contents of our experiences and the contents of our words and sentences? A lot – or so I will argue in these lectures.

Lecture 1: The Representationalist Framework

How should we think about representation? Or, better, how should we think about representation when we are interested in the way belief represents how we take things to be, the way perceptual responses represent things as being thus and so, and the way words in a language (when used in assertions) represent how we take things to be?

In this lecture, I will connect the answers to these questions to, e.g., the role of thought experiments in philosophy and what it takes to be true.

Lecture 2: Centered Content

To represent is to partition into the possibilities those that are in accord with how things are being represented to be and the rest. It would be nice if we could think of these possibilities as possible worlds in the sense of complete ways things might be. Unfortunately we can't. There's a fancy argument to show this and (I am glad to report) an easy argument as well. In this lecture we spell this out and note the substantial task that the acknowledgement of centered content sets us when we address the question of how we extract information from the words we encounter from mouths, pages and screens.

Lecture 3: Getting Information from Words with Centered Content

We have words whose job it is to tell us how things are in relation to some point in space-time. They are the words that make sentences with centered content. In this

lecture, we review some of these words and how they work. We'll see how a version of the description theory of names is true; how the twin earth example doesn't support externalism; and why we should not give too much weight to the semantics of belief reports in coming to judgments about what words mean.

Lecture 4: What Physicalists should say about Mary

In her black and white room, Mary doesn't know what it is like to have colour experiences. On her release, she does. But in the room she knew all there was to know about the physical nature of our world. It follows that there is more to know about the nature of our world than its physical nature. Physicalism is false.

Physicalists have said many, many things in response to this argument. We will argue that, somehow or other, they didn't address the most important thing to say.

Lecture 5: Leibniz's Law and the Philosophy of Mind

Some advocates of what is often called 'the phenomenal concepts strategy' come close to holding that we can refer to our current phenomenal states without knowing the nature of that to which we are referring. In that case, why should I care when I hear 'I am in pain' coming from your mouth. You don't know what you are talking about! But if we agree, with common-sense, that we do know the nature of what we are referring to, and when it is reasonable to hold that someone is in pain or seeing red, a good deal follows about what we have to say about mental states in general and colour in particular.

Lecture 6: Ethics for Cognitivists

Someone who says that murder is wrong represents how they take murder to be, or so I'll say and briefly argue. I am, that is, a cognitivist in ethics. In this lecture, we mainly explore what cognitivists have to say (have no choice but to say) about ethical properties and ethical theory more generally.

Our constraints will be a metaphysical one and a motivational one. Don't postulate properties we have no reason to believe are instantiated, and make sure it makes sense to care whether or not the properties in question are instantiated.

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