

# On The Status of Appearances

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## **Abstract**

I will take a close look at C.D. Broad's "penny", deciding on the ontological status of appearances. I will determine if it is one ontological entity or many (multiplied indefinitely by a ghostly array of "appearances"). Considering the apparent presence of separate entities, I will also weigh the other arguments held by Armstrong and Chisholm as to their explanation in more parsimonious ways.

## **1 Ontological Problem of Appearances**

The question for analysis is as follows: How is the appearance of a thing related to the thing that appears? If I were to take any object in existence in the outside world and attempt to analyse it, I would come upon the fact that I am perceiving particular characteristics (or qualities) of that thing "out there." As I inspect the thing "out there", I will notice that it has a set of qualities that are constantly changing based upon its three-space locale in relation to me. I will also note that there are some qualities that I am perceiving that no one else is perceiving (or can ever perceive) at that exact same moment. The question then is, how are these different qualities, as perceived by me and others, related to the object that exists.

Van Inwagen noted that the world could be divided into two parts: the self, and everything else that is not part of the self. In that respect, he notes, there is also a distinction between the properties that are dependent on the

self, and properties that are not dependent on the self in any manner (he uses as an example the size and shape of the moon.) Where exactly, he asks, falls “the appearances of things ... with respect to these divisions?”

## 2 Separate Entities

The problem with appearances arises when “two sets of properties apparently belong to the same object, and yet are incompatible with each other.”[2, p. 267] The philosopher’s job is to reconcile the physical objective qualities of the object, and its changing appearances to the same observer at different moments, or among different observers at the same moment. The changing appearances of the object is incompatible with its constant true properties.

Broad invoked the theory of “sensa” which takes the appearances experienced by an observer to be parts of the world outside, individually existent apart from the observer. To demonstrate this theory Broad uses the changing appearances of a penny. Using this concrete example, the problem is to reconcile the differing appearances of the penny (as it changes its appearance to the observer, with regard to shape) with the supposed (and in fact objectively real) shape of the penny: elliptical versus round shapes.

Broad notes that some people might find no problem in this; they will state that the problem of appearances can be resolved, insofar as the penny is concerned, through the *law of perspectives*. This is not a relevant answer argues Broad; while it is true that we can predict what shape an object will have when we have the object’s “real” shape, and its position to the observer, this is not the question that we are concentrating on.[2, p. 268] What we are concentrating on is the compatibility between these different appearances and the supposed roundness of the penny.

### 2.1 Multiple Relation Theory

Multiple Relation Theory (MRT) explains that there is a unique correlation between the mind, object, and a characteristic. The theory, originally conceptualised in *Principia Mathematica* by Bertrand Russell, argues that the constituents of propositions are unified in such a way as to not constitute a fact by themselves. In the context of appearances, using the example of the penny appearing to be elliptical, “is to say that a unique and not further analysable relation of ‘appearing’ holds between the penny, my mind, and

the general characteristic of ellipticity.”[2, p. 268]

In effect, this theory states that we are unaware of anything that is in fact elliptical. Rather, we are aware that there are unique characteristics between the relationship of the mind of the observer (receiving the sense data,) the actual object (the penny,) and its particular characteristic in question (the elliptical “shape”.) Broad does not expand on this any further as he dismisses it for the Object Theory, which has not been explained in enough detail.

## 2.2 Object Theory

Object Theory (OT) moves the focus from the objective penny, to the penny’s appearance as the object. The penny’s appearance is the concrete object being analysed. In other words, the penny actually have the characteristics which it merely *seems* to have. So when we say: it seems to me like the penny has an ellipsoidal shape, it really does have that shape.

Broad generalises the theory in the following manner:[2, p. 269]

Whenever I truly judge that  $x$  appears to me to have the sensible quality  $q$ , what happens is that I am directly aware of a certain object  $y$ , which ( $a$ ) really does have the quality  $q$ , and ( $b$ ) stands in some peculiarly intimate relation, yet to be determined, to  $x$ .

Broad uses this theory to uphold his sensum theory; the *sensa*, he notes, is what we are commonly in direct contact with. We are not in direct contact with the physical object, otherwise why would the object change its shape yet remain the same.

## 3 Single Entity

Armstrong, however, argues that perceptions are without qualities. There is no such thing as a mental, or sense data, perception, rather, the only qualities existent are those in the physical object itself. The separation of the qualities themselves, from primary to secondary characteristics, are those of objective physical *phenomena*. He argues that colours and the like are *intrinsic* properties of objects.

### 3.1 Causal Theory of the Mind

Armstrong brings up a pertinent point regarding those who would be against the causal theory he is arguing for.

- the green on the leaves are characteristics of something mental;
- the green on the leaves is perceived introspectively;
- all things we are aware of introspectively are mental;
- *concept* of greenness is not causal.
- => there exists something mental which is not causal.

External characteristics have been attempted to be shown as mental through such arguments as perceptual illusion, and scientific “plausibility”. The first quite simply states that if you imagine an object *y* having the characteristic *a*, yet it does not exist in reality in that particular combination. Then it may be said that characteristic *a* exists only in the mind (ie: as sense-data). Armstrong argues against this, stating that “[the causal theorist] should deny that when something physical looks green to somebody, but is not green ... then the sensory quality of greenness is present.”[1, p. 273] Instead, the something “green” is an ordinary *physical* something and it’s man-made (conjured by human intellect).

### 3.2 Secondary Qualities

The second argument against the causal theory of the mind tends to rest on the propagation of certain characteristics into a primary and secondary order. The second order qualities are those that involve human interpretation: colour, sound, taste, smell, Etc. While these qualities are not explained directly by science, - for example, heat is the motion of molecules - the perceived secondary qualities tend to exist, Hence,

- if they exist then they must be about *something*;
- they have been *undefined* by physics;
- that which is not physical is mental.
- => they must qualify something mental.

As convincing as this line of reason is, Armstrong argues against it, holding on to the necessity of interpreting the second order qualities (converting them, *per se*) as first order ones through the use of the “Gestalt” theory. This theory explains that they are primary qualities, but that we can only see them in their totality. Hence, when we sense heat, we are not sensing each individual molecule moving; rather, we are sensing the sum of the molecules’ movements. Further, each of the secondary qualities have no structure, yet they have consistent and systematic relations among themselves.

### 3.3 Adverbial Theory

Throughout, the arguments seem, like the description of *is* - what is *is* - nothing more than just a play of the word “appearances”. For this reason, Roderick Chisholm suggested a theory to put at rest the differences between the various uses of the word “appearance”. Chisholm’s basic argument is that the perception of an object “out there” is the result of a set of complex physiological and psychological processes. He doesn’t necessarily endorse Broad’s notion as it will “multiply entities beyond necessity.”[3, p. 284]

When something appears white, Chisholm argues, ‘white’ in this sense is an adverb. It describes *how* the object is appearing to us - the *way* the object makes its impression upon us. As a result we may rephrase the statement to: the observer is appeared to whitely. The problem with this statement, however, is that we feel there to be a more “intimate” connection between that which exists and its appearance. This has been termed the *phenomenological problem*. As a result, he determines four facts, un-muddled by “unwarranted philosophical conclusions.”

- We see the object with a particular set of characteristics because of the way it appears to us.
  - However, this does not imply that the perceived characteristics are created by the object.
- The way one is being appeared to by an object plays a “fundamental role” within the context of justification.
  - If one were asked what justification is there in believing that the object  $x$  is indeed what you are seeing, eventually, one would say that it is indeed  $x$  by proposing the characteristics being perceived.

- Along the lines of Armstrong’s Gestalt theory, when we perceive an object, say a line segment comprised of smaller ( one micron ) line segments, then we will always perceive this object as appearing to us in a particular way.
  - The parts that we cannot perceive will not appear to us at all.
- If you can see the whole, then you are perceiving the parts of the whole regardless.

In sum, the adverbial theory places emphasis on simplification of the concepts behind “appearances”, such that it makes no over-reaching philosophical assumptions. It keeps to the practicality of human language in an attempt to explain a process (perceiving) that can get very ugly very quickly.

## 4 Final Thoughts

There does not seem, in any of these theories, to be an all-inclusive but restrictive set of premises. For example, Broad’s theory overshoots, violating Ockham’s Razor. He brings into existence a multitude of appearances, all which are real and infinite. While the other theories aid in clarifying the differing parts-of-speech for uses of the word “appearance”, they do very little to help clear up *what* we are seeing.

Consider, for example, this page you are reading. There is no doubt that you are seeing a particular paper, and that you are seeing the words on the paper. The question is, how is the paper appearing to you and what it’s relation to the way someone else might see it. While Broad dismissed the theory of perspectives and came up with a philosophical answer, I believe that there is still a base foundation for a theory of appearances in physics.

While I am not a physics expert I have a sufficient grasp of the concepts behind the reflection of light off of surfaces to formulate a rough theory of my own. Might I just state that I agree to a considerable degree with Chisholm *viz.* his analysis of the grammatical importance of the word “appearance”. However, I believe that this fails to combine the physics with physiology and philosophy.

Consider the piece of paper mentioned above. If it is the case that the same piece of paper appears different between your perceiving it, and my perceiving it at the same moment, then this may be attributed to the way

light reflects off of the paper. If there was no light source, we would have nothing to see! Further, the difference in perception has a great deal to do, not with perspectives, but with the way the light travels *from* the source and reflects off of the object. Remember Broads objection to perspectives: it is a prediction of how something is to look like based on your three-space position. It, however, doesn't consider the physics of electromagnetic radiation.

Electromagnetic radiation at such high frequencies, as light, is very reflective and absorbable. When we see something that is red, say a red balloon, we are not seeing the balloon at all. Rather, we are seeing the light energy (from a particular light source) being absorbed by the chemical coating the balloon. What light is allowed to escape and be reflected is of a particular wavelength, which in this case is red. In effect, we *never* directly perceive the object we are looking at. All we perceive is a particular chemical and physical reaction of light energy. When the light energy reaches our eyes, we experience another electro-chemical reaction such that this light energy *impresses* upon us the object's image.

I also argue that we can *never* see, or conceptualise to any degree of reality, an object through the use of our imagination that which has not already been exposed to us. While it is true that I can picture a "pink elephant" in my head, or a "yellow monkey", I cannot see it as it actually would exist, simply because it does not exist. All that I, or anyone else, can do is combine the abstract concept of yellowness (the average of all objects labelled yellow which I have perceived) and a real picture (once again from memory) of a monkey. I attempt to overlay these two concepts *from memory* to formulate an approximate mental image similar to my understanding of this fictitious object.

While this is just a quick sketch of this theory, I do not presume that it is all encompassing of the different pitfalls awaiting. Further, there might be great objections from those defending the power of human imagination. But I would appeal to those defenders of human imagination to come up with a concept which is not comprised by a melange of previous experiences and perceptions from memory.

## References

- [1] Armstrong, D. M. "Qualities: and Excerpt from *Consciousness and Causality*." Van Inwagen 272-81.

- [2] Broad, C. D. "The Theory of Sensa: an Excerpt from *Scientific Thought*." Van Inwagen 267-71.
- [3] Chisholm, Roderick M. "The Status of Appearances: an Excerpt from *Theory of Knowledge* (1st Edition)." Van Inwagen 281-90.
- [4] Van Inwagen, Peter and Dean W. Zimmerman ed. *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. Pp. 261-265.