

Metaphysics and epistemology

This handout is, in part, a response to arguments presented in 'Metaphysics as speculative nonsense'. It is worth reading that handout first.

CAN WE HAVE KNOWLEDGE BEYOND SENSE EXPERIENCE?

One problem with thinking that religious, ethical and metaphysical language refers to things (God, values, Forms, etc.) is that we cannot see or experience these 'things' via the senses. Even if metaphysical statements are meaningful, even if they state facts, this doesn't mean that we can know whether they are true or false, unless we can test them through sense experience. In some cases, over time, metaphysical arguments may become reinterpreted empirically. Take substance dualism: Could the existence of a soul separable from the body be supported by accounts of reincarnation and out of body experiences? Or undermined by evidence that no neural events happen without being caused by other physical events? If so, then empiricists may allow that sense experience can establish whether there is a soul or not. But otherwise, how could metaphysical knowledge be gained? The debate about metaphysics turns toward the question of what capacities for knowledge human beings have, i.e. the debate between empiricism and rationalism.

Few, if any, of the arguments studied in A2 philosophy can be decided on the grounds of sense experience alone. We cannot, in one section, come to a conclusion regarding whether any of them work! So we shall instead consider the nature of the arguments philosophers have made in metaphysics.

VARIETIES OF EXPERIENCE

Very few arguments have no contact at all with experience. Most attempt to make sense of experience. Wilfrid Sellars said that

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. ('Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man')

Taking up one of these examples: Is aesthetic experience a type of sense experience? Undoubtedly it involves the five senses, but these are not enough – we need emotional responses as well. So can emotional responses, not on their own perhaps, but when reflected upon and thought about, give us a kind of knowledge, e.g. that something is beautiful or elegant? Or is aesthetics entirely a matter of subjective taste, so there is no such thing as aesthetic knowledge?

Again, can emotions involved in moral experience give us knowledge of duties? Can experiences surrounding death, such as 'out of body' experiences, provide evidence for a

soul or an afterlife? Can religious experience establish knowledge of God's existence and nature?

Sense experience, then, is only one aspect of experience. To claim that there is knowledge beyond that given to us by the senses is, therefore, not necessary to argue that we have knowledge that can't be tested against experience generally.

INFERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION

The question of 'how things hang together' may start with the question of how our experiences of the world hang together. A strict empiricism may argue that only sense experience provides knowledge, while aesthetic, moral and religious experience are no more than subjective responses. They are fundamentally different in kind from sense experience.

Alternatively, an empiricist may allow that such forms of experience may represent how the world is, but unlike sense experiences, first, we cannot show that they do (so we cannot claim to know, e.g. that morality is objective) and second, we cannot tell which particular experiences are accurate and which are not (so we cannot claim to know, e.g. that abortion is wrong). For both reasons, it is impossible for us to establish any knowledge in these areas.

But are either of these interpretations of human experience satisfactory? We can argue that, while we may not know as much or as clearly on the basis of aesthetic, moral or religious experience, there are some claims that we can know by reflecting on our experience using philosophical reasoning that appeals to coherence, plausibility, simplicity and so on. For example, moral cognitivism may argue that only the claim that there are objective moral values can make sense of the possibility of moral progress and moral mistakes. The argument from design in philosophy of religion asks what best explains our experience of the world as apparently 'designed', and argues to the metaphysical claim that God exists.

And what is the best explanation of sense experience itself? Kant observes that sense experience presents us with a world of physical objects, existing independently of our experience in space and time. He asks how this is possible, and his answer defends a controversial metaphysical system.

These arguments assume or defend the view that reasoning can yield knowledge. Plato, Descartes, and Kant argue that reasoning can do this on its own, and through a priori deduction. We have been considering the claim that the reasoning involved is inference to the best explanation. And we can argue either that reasoning by itself can establish what the best explanation is, or that the conclusions reached by reason must be tested against our experience generally before we can know whether they are sound. Occasionally, metaphysical claims may even yield empirical predictions that can, at least in theory, be tested scientifically.

At this point, empiricists may respond that, unless we can use objective empirical tests, we cannot establish that any particular explanation is the best explanation. And so we cannot have knowledge beyond that given by sense experience.

DO ALL EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS INVOLVE METAPHYSICS?

A different defence of metaphysics argues that every theory of knowledge, even strict empiricism, involves metaphysical claims. So what must empiricism assume about sense experience that makes it metaphysical?

Sense experience informs us what particular physical objects exist. But it cannot establish what exists when a physical object exists, nor can it give a complete account of how we know about physical objects. The commonsense position is that physical objects exist independently of our experience in space and time. But we can argue that this is a metaphysical claim, which cannot be shown to be true on the basis of sense experience alone, and three very stringent empiricists – Berkeley, Hume and Ayer – all question it.

So just on the basis of sense experience, what can we say about the existence of physical objects? Berkeley argues for idealism, Ayer for phenomenalism, while Hume adopts his mitigated scepticism. However, all three responses appear to be committed to a very controversial, and metaphysical, view of sense experience itself, viz. that sense experiences exist as mental ‘things’, as sense data. Defending the possibility of sense data against doubts about their coherence or existence involves empiricism in a metaphysical debate.

Furthermore, there will be an issue of how these claims about sense experience fit in with the claims of sense experience. Scientific investigation indicates a close connection between the brain and sense experience. But the issue of how the brain gives rise to experience appears, at present at least, to be a metaphysical question.

We can argue, therefore, that it is inevitable that reflecting on even just our sense experience leads to metaphysical questions and the use of reasoning that cannot be tested directly by sense experience. So metaphysics is essential to intellectual enquiry.

But empiricism may respond that all that we have demonstrated is that we are unable to form a complete or coherent account of the world. These debates about the nature of sense experience simply show that we cannot know what sense experience itself is. The claim that we can only know what sense experience reveals is not committed to any form of metaphysics – as soon as metaphysics begins, it refuses to defend any claim at all.