

Perception

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PHLB20 Lecture Notes 5

In the previous lecture notes we discussed ‘inference to the best explanation’ (IBE). We noted that IBE begins with a survey of the ‘data’. But what is data?

1 Data in the ordinary sense

Something like ‘what we’re taking for granted’ or ‘what we want explained’.

If this is right, data could be about anything, depending on what our purposes are.

Moreover, whether we regard something as data can change, depending on what our purposes are.

Right now, I accept as data that Jo is shouting. I want to explain this. My data is that Jo is shouting. Suppose I regard the explanation that Jo is shouting out of anger as the best. Then I accept that Jo is angry. But now I want to explain this: why is Jo angry? Now my data includes the fact that Jo is angry.

There my set of data grew: initially the proposition that Jo is angry was not a piece of data; later it became a piece of data.

Obviously a claim that is already regarded as data in one explanatory project can be an explainer in another. Why is Fran frightened? Because Jo is shouting. Here I treat something that is a piece of accepted data in one context as an explanation of the data in another context.

Obviously also what I regard as data and what you regard as data can differ.

Alternatively, if I accept a certain claim on the basis of an IBE, thereby treating it as data from time to time, a superior explanation, one we hadn’t canvassed in the earlier IBE, might later come to light. If so, the initial explanation might be chucked out; in that case we would stop regarding it as data.

2 Data in the philosophical sense

The last handout advanced a picture of learning on which we learn in part ‘by perception’ and in part ‘by reasoning’. We thought that most reasoning involves IBE. But a chain of explanations has to come to an end somewhere. At some point we need to encounter what we could think of as something like ‘ultimate’ data. Our ultimate data needs to in part concern the world around us, because our knowledge is sensitive to changes in the world around us. We think of ‘ultimate’ data that is sensitive to such changes as ‘perceptual data’. And we can think of examples of such data as more-or-less *what we know by looking (and not thinking about it too much)*, as one of you guys put it.

How ‘objective’ is perceptual data? To see what I mean by this, note that it is evident that what one knows by looking is

partly a matter of what one sees and partly a matter of one’s interpretation of what one sees. Doctor House and Doctor Wilson are looking at the same MRI films: Doctor House looks at the squiggles and squoggles and sees lupus; Doctor Wilson sees paraneoplastic syndrome. They see the same squiggles and squoggles but interpret them differently.

Now sometimes it is possible to eliminate this difference by making the interpretation explicit and putting the diagnosis into the form of an IBE: ‘look at this line: this is characteristic of calcination which results from blah blah blah’, says House. House has now rendered his perception of lupus into an inference to lupus as the best explanation of the squiggles on the film: what he once treated as data, known by looking—that the patient has lupus—is now treated as an explanation of different data—that the squiggles go this or that way. In rendering the interpretive element of perception into an IBE, it may be possible to locate the source of House and Wilson’s disagreement: House has made a mistake about the usual results of lupus; Wilson has overlooked certain aspects of the picture which tell against paraneoplastic syndrome; both of them are on the same page on what the picture shows and on the relevant science, but the disagreement is a matter of taste.

Is this always possible? Can we always isolate the interpretation and push it into an explanation, so that if this goes on enough, we come to somehow ‘pure’ data?

Why is it important whether there is such a thing as pure data? If not, then we see a further source of disagreement which is impossible to settle. Doctor House just sees lupus; Doctor Wilson just sees paraneoplastic syndrome; and that’s that.

3 Is there pure data?

Susanna Siegel’s article makes a move at saying what such data would be like. Her view, roughly, is this:

(S1) One’s pure data is one’s phenomenal data; where

(S2) Sam’s phenomenal data is what is known by everyone with the same ‘phenomenal character’ as Sam.

What is ‘phenomenal character’? Something like a sensation or a feeling. A pain and an itch have a different phenomenal character; two pains can have a different phenomenal character (if one is burning and one is stabbing, say); but they can also have the same phenomenal character (if both are burning in the exact same way). When I see a red thing, that has a different phenomenal character than seeing a green thing (or a yellow thing or a blue thing); but when I see a red tomato that can have the same phenomenal character as someone else seeing a

red tomato. It can also have the same phenomenal character of someone dreaming of a red tomato, or seeing a really good copy of a tomato, etc.

House and Wilson are looking at the MRI. Perhaps they have the same phenomenal character. If so, then if they disagree about the disease, (S2) predicts that information about disease is not part of phenomenal data. Presumably they would agree about the shapes and colors or shades on the MRI though: in that case information about which shapes and colors are in front of you might be part of phenomenal data.

Is it? Two problems:

3.1 Dreaming

Sara sees the red color and round shape of a tomato. Dara is dreaming of a red round tomato. Sara and Dara have the same phenomenal character. Sara knows that a red round thing is in front of her. But Dara does not. So (S2) says that information about colors and shapes is not part of phenomenal data. If information about colors and shapes is not, it is hard to see what could be. So if, by (S1), we are to look to phenomenal data for pure data, there is little or no pure data.

In reply, note that (S2) is not really what Siegel advances. Her discussion concerns the ‘content of perception’, which is a notion less like what you *know* by looking and more like what you *believe* by looking; or what from the first-person perspective you take yourself to know by looking. Her real view is closer to the following:

(S3) Sam’s phenomenal data is what is taken-as-known by everyone with the same ‘phenomenal character’ as Sam.

Since Dara takes herself to know that there is a red round thing in front of her, (S3) lets information about colors and shapes count as phenomenal data.

3.2 Inversion

Inez is ‘spectrally inverted’: when she looks at a red tomato, she has the same phenomenal character Sam has when Sam looks at a green tomato. Red things look green to Inez. Similarly, when Inez looks at a green tomato, she has the same phenomenal character Sam has when Sam looks at a red tomato: green things look red to Inez. Same thing with yellow things looking blue, blue things looking yellow, and so on.

But Inez has correct opinions about the colors of things. When she and Sam both look at a green tomato, they both say ‘it’s green’. And they both would get it if asked to bring a green tomato. So, plausibly, Inez knows that a green tomato is in front of her, and takes herself to know this.

But now consider Inez looking at a green tomato and Sam looking at a red tomato. Sam knows that a red tomato is up ahead, while Inez knows that a green tomato is up ahead. But they have the same phenomenal character.

So by (S3), Sam’s phenomenal data does not include facts about colors.

(Exercise: can you set up a similar argument to show that Sam’s phenomenal data does not include facts about *shapes*?)

But if not, then by (S1), pure data does not contain such information either. So *either* some other notion of pure data can be concocted which we do not know about *or* there is little or no perceptual knowledge that does not involve interpretation.

4 Replies

1. Perhaps pure data is just information about which phenomenal character one has. Inez looking at a red tomato has the pure data that she has green-type phenomenal character, while Sam’s pure data is about having red-type phenomenal character.

Problems:

- (a) Phenomenal character is private. Both of us can check and agree on the shapes and shades on the MRI, but I do not have access to your phenomenal character. So if the point of pure data is to resolve disputes, data about phenomenal character will be of no help here.
- (b) The notion of phenomenal character is obscure. Siegel’s real view is that House and Wilson have *different* phenomenal characters looking at the MRI film.

Is this right? Well who knows? The notion of phenomenal character is based on a couple of examples. How we should go beyond these examples to settle cases like this is very contentious.

2. Perhaps Inez looking at a red tomato and Sam looking at a green tomato have different phenomenal characters. This is akin to Siegel’s real view.

Problem:

- If so then it would seem that interpretation infects phenomenal character. (S1) gives us a bad pointer for where to look for pure data. Only data which is completely common between House and Wilson can count as pure data, but according to this reply they could have different phenomenal data. If so, phenomenal data can’t be pure data, as against (S1).

5 Verdict

If we are looking for pure data, we are unlikely to find it. Perhaps all data is influenced by interpretation. And we have no reason to suppose that we will always be able to isolate the interpretation from some neutral starting point by pushing the interpretation into an IBE when disagreement arises.