

SUMMARY FOR NON-SPECIALISTS

In normal cases we have no doubt that when we see an object we have everything that is needed to know that there is the object in front of us. I see a pig in my garden and hence I know that there is a pig in my garden. When somebody asks us “how do you know that there was a pig in your garden?”, we can reply: “I saw it” and it normally closes the topic. This platitude is a part of our know-how about how to use senses. Let’s call it “First Rule of Senses’ User Manual”.

However, there is another platitude. In similarly normal cases, we are perfectly comfortable to act along the lines of First Rule and at the same time to accept another platitude that our senses are fallible. All of us sometimes suffer from illusion or even hallucination – situations in which things before us seem to present just like they were there when in fact they are not. Call this the “Second Rule of Senses’ User Manual”.

Both of these platitudes are uncontroversial and normally we don’t see any contradiction between them. However, sometimes, for example when we are children who use to attack very difficult problems straightforwardly, it may come to our minds that it is possible that in principle *all* our perceptions are illusions or hallucinations. At least, the existence of *Matrix* movies is an evidence that this thought sometimes comes to our minds. When we imagine such a situation of total illusion or hallucination, we suspend our acceptance of the First Rule because we see the unexpected consequences of the Second Rule. Philosophical scepticism – the idea that we in principle cannot have knowledge about observable things because of the fallibility of our senses – is at odds with our common sense. However queer it seems to be, it is only an ultimate, but unexpected conclusion of inference which starts from the acceptance of the Second Rule.

The aim of my research project is to provide a philosophical explanation of what we normally take for granted as the uncontroversial conjunction of the First and the Second Rule. Philosophical explanation leaves untouched our common-sense intuition that the two rules are compatible. Instead, it makes a rationale of this common-sense intuition explicit and explains why they should be taken seriously at the same time.

It is not an obvious line of argumentation. The first reaction to the sceptic challenge is to provisionally accept the Second Rule but also make an attempt to find a solid ground or the foundation of our knowledge about the mind-independent world about us. This is why attempts of this kind are labelled as “foundationalist”. In the foundationalist picture of our perception our knowledge about objects of perception is in principle infallible – there is always a solid rock of immediate, direct presence of the objects of perception. If we suffer from illusion, it is a contingent and nonessential fact about our perceptual capacities.

The plan of my research is different. Against this approach, I will argue that the objective reasons of our beliefs about observable and mind-independent objects are not directly accessible for us: there is nothing in our perception which is an indefeasible evidence that things we perceive really exist and have properties which they seem to have. Nevertheless, the objective reasons for our perceptual beliefs are implicitly present in our perception and can be recovered. Normally we proceed without explicating them, but if we have good reasons to provide the explication, we can make them explicit. But even in the case of explicit articulation of reasons for taking our judgements about observable objects as true, they are only the best available reasons, and not ultimate, infallible proofs. We have access to the objective grounds of perceptual beliefs, but this access is indirect and based on complex cognitive processes. There is no such thing as direct “acquaintance” with the objects of our perception. On the other hand, the very perception entitles us, against the background of all our presupposed beliefs and on the basis of the highly plausible evidence that judgements about observable objects are true. That is all we need to be truly certain, in everyday life, that the world around exists and has properties which we ascribe to it. So, in other words, we can know and be certain that we are acquainted with the observable world around us, however not directly.

Full justification of this argument is an expected result of my research project. The reason to undertake this research is as follows: the lack of plausible justification of our common-sense intuition that existence of the world around us is certain, but knowledge about it fallible, remains – as Immanuel Kant said – the great “scandal of philosophy”.