Perception & the external world
Over the course of the last few weeks of class, we have been discussing a variety of questions about the nature of human beings -- these have included questions about the nature of persons, and the nature of human free will.

Beginning today we will be spending a few classes on the nature of the relationship between human beings and the world we (seem to) inhabit.

The first question we will address is: what, if anything, can we know about the world outside of ourselves? It is natural to think that, if we do know anything about the world outside of us, we have this knowledge through perceptual experience of the world -- by seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling it.

Accordingly, we will begin our discussion of our knowledge of the external world by asking a few questions about perception. In particular, we will be asking: given that a perceptual experience is an awareness of something, what sorts of things are we directly aware of in perceptual experience?

This might seem to be an easy question. In visual experiences, we are aware of (among other things) colors and shapes; in auditory perception we are aware of loudness, pitch, and timbre; in tactile experience we are aware of texture and temperature; and so on.
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However, this is not the hard part about understanding perceptual awareness. Let’s use sensible qualities as a term for the properties that we are aware of in sense experience. Then we can concede that it is pretty easy to list the sensible qualities; what is hard is to understand what these sensible qualities are.

Here there seem to be two ways we could go:

**Objectivism about sensible qualities**

Sensible qualities are properties of things in the environment around the perceiver. Whether or not those things exist, and have those properties, is independent of their being perceived.

**Subjectivism about sensible qualities**

While sensible qualities seem to be properties which things could have independently of their being perceived, in fact they are “in our minds” -- they are properties of our perceptual experiences, and not of anything which could exist independently of being perceived.
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Objectivism certainly has a good claim to being the common sense view of sense perception. Indeed, it might be hard to understand what the subjectivist view even means. A few examples of cases in which sensible qualities really do seem to be “in the mind” might help.
The Hermann grid illusion
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In each of these cases, we seem to be visually aware of some sensible quality -- for example, the changing colors of the dots on the grid in the second case, or the movement of the concentric circles in the third case -- which is not a property which the object being perceived has independently of being perceived. In such a case, we might say that our sensory systems are “projecting” the property onto the object. Or, in other words, that the sensible quality is just in our minds.
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The subjectivist can be understood as saying that all perception of sensible qualities is like this: every time we, for example, see color, we are seeing something which is, strictly speaking, just in our minds, and which we only project onto the world.

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Focusing on the case of the perception of color, Berkeley emphasized the relativity of perception, using examples like the colors of clouds.

*Phil.* What! are then the beautiful red and purple we see on yonder clouds, really in them? Or do you imagine they have in themselves any other form than that of a dark mist or vapour?

Clouds might appear from the ground to be red and purple at sunset, but a moment earlier appear to be a very different color; and, from close up, they might look different still.

But if the clouds really have a color, at most one of these perceptual experiences must be accurate. Berkeley’s challenge is to come up with a non-arbitrary way of distinguishing the real from the apparent colors of things.
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This is harder to do than one might think, especially when one thinks about the colors that things appear to have under microscopes, and the colors of things as perceived by non-human animals. Is one of these ways of perceiving color really the right way?

If not, it is hard to escape subjectivism about color: the view that when we are seeing colors, we are seeing something in our mind rather than a property of external objects.
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Let’s think a bit more about what subjectivism about color might mean.

If colors are not properties of external objects, then what are they properties of? What things really are red, if not objects in my environment?

A natural answer to this question is: they are properties of our own ideas. In sense perception, on this sort of view, we are really only immediately aware of our own ideas and their properties. These “ideas” are often called sense data, and the accompanying theory of perception the sense datum theory of perception.

This theory is also suggested by cases of illusion, like the ones discussed earlier. Remember the experience in which the concentric circles seemed to be moving relative to each other. When you were having that experience, you were aware of something which was moving; but this thing cannot be the images of the concentric circles flashed on the screen, since those were not moving. So whatever was moving must have been something internal to your mind -- a sense datum. And it seems odd to think that in this case you were perceiving one of your own ideas, whereas in the moment before the circles seem to move, you weren’t. Hence reflection on cases of illusion, as well as normal cases of color perception, seems to lead us to the sense datum theory of perception.
The sense datum theory of perception: the theory that in perceptual experiences, we are only immediately aware of our own ideas (called “sense data”).

Let’s think about some of the consequences of this theory of perception for our knowledge of the world around us. How, on this sort of view, might perceptual experiences give us knowledge of our environments?

Imagine that I am having a visual experience of an apple. Really, if the sense datum theory is correct, I am having a visual experience of a sense datum. So our question is: how can my awareness of the properties of that sense datum give me knowledge of the properties of the external object, the apple?

It seems that to get such knowledge, I must know something of the form: if I am experiencing a sense datum which is such-and-such, then this is (probably) caused by an external object which is so-and-so. In this case, for example, I might know that if I am aware of a reddish circular sense datum, then this is probably caused by a ripe apple.

But, as Nagel says, it is hard to see how we could know this sort of thing.
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If you try to argue that there must be an external physical world, because you wouldn’t see buildings, people, or stars unless there were things out there that reflected or shed light into your eyes and caused your visual experiences, the reply is obvious: How do you know that? It’s just another claim about the external world and your relation to it, and it has to be based on the evidence of your senses. But you can rely on that specific evidence about how visual experiences are caused only if you can already rely in general on the contents of your mind to tell you about the external world. And that is exactly what has been called into question. If you try to prove the reliability of your impressions by appealing to your impressions, you’re arguing in a circle and won’t get anywhere.
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The worry is this: if I only get information about my environment through sense perception, and if sense perception only ever gives me awareness of my own sense data, how can I know anything about the relationship between those sense data and external objects? How, for example, can I know that sense data of a certain sort are usually caused by ripe apples?

A tempting reply is: because in the past when I have seen sense data of this sort, this has been followed by a biting sensation, followed by pleasant taste sensations. Does this answer the challenge?
This line of reasoning seems to show that the sense datum theory of perception leads to a surprising skeptical conclusion:

**Skepticism about our knowledge of the external world**

We have no knowledge of the properties of things outside our own minds.

Nagel also discusses another powerful line of argument for this skeptical conclusion which, unlike the argument we just discussed, does not assume the sense datum theory of perception.

This argument begins with the invocation of a familiar sort of thought experiment.
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Would things seem any different to you if in fact all these things existed only in your mind—if everything you took to be the real world outside was just a giant dream or hallucination, from which you will never wake up? If it were like that, then of course you couldn’t wake up, as you can from a dream, because it would mean there was no “real” world to wake up into. So it wouldn’t be exactly like a normal dream or hallucination. As we usually think of dreams, they go on in the minds of people who are actually lying in a real bed in a real house, even if in the dream they are running away from a homicidal lawnmower through the streets of Kansas City. We also assume that normal dreams depend on what is happening in the dreamer’s brain while he sleeps.

But couldn’t all your experiences be like a giant dream with no external world outside it? How can you know that isn’t what’s going on? If all your experience were a dream with nothing outside, then any evidence you tried to use to prove to yourself that there was an outside world would just be part of the dream.
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The question posed in this passage is one which was posed by Descartes: how do you know that your perceptual experiences are not a kind of dream, or complex illusion?

But why, you might ask, is this supposed to be such a hard question to answer?

Nagel’s answer is evident from question which begins the passage we just read. He asks: Would things seem any different to you if in fact you were having a very long and detailed dream? His implied answer is: No. We can imagine having a dream which was, in every way, indistinguishable from our present experiences.

The question we now want to ask is: if Nagel is right in this claim about indistinguishability, why would this indicate that we have no knowledge of the existence of an external world? What is the connection between indistinguishability and knowledge?
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This argument begins with the invocation of a familiar sort of thought experiment.

Would things seem any different to you if in fact all these things existed *only* in your mind—if everything you took to be the real world outside was just a giant dream or hallucination, from which you will never wake up? If it were like that, then of course you *couldn’t* wake up, as you can from a dream, because it would mean there was no “real” world to wake up into. So it wouldn’t be exactly like a normal dream or hallucination. As we usually think of dreams, they go on in the minds of people who are actually lying in a real bed in a real house, even if in the dream they are running away from a homicidal lawn mower through the streets of Kansas City. We also assume that normal dreams depend on what is happening in the dreamer’s brain while he sleeps.

But couldn’t all your experiences be like a giant dream with *no* external world outside it? How can you know that isn’t what’s going on? If all your experience were a dream with *nothing* outside, then any evidence you tried to use to prove to yourself that there was an outside world would just be part of the dream.

The question we now want to ask is: if Nagel is right in this claim about indistinguishability, why would this indicate that we have no *knowledge* of the existence of an external world? What is the connection between indistinguishability and knowledge?

The connection seems to be something like this:

If I cannot distinguish between situation A and situation B, then I cannot know which of situation A and situation B I am in.

Can you think of any examples which would count in favor of, or against, this sort of principle connecting indistinguishability and knowledge?
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To see how a principle of this sort might lead to the skeptical conclusion, let’s imagine two scenarios of the sort that Nagel and Descartes had in mind.

Imagine that you are having a visual experience which seems to be a visual experience of your hands. Let’s use REALITY and DREAMWORLD as names for the following two possible scenarios: let REALITY be a world in which I have just the experiences I have had, and these more or less accurately reflect a world of external objects -- so, in particular, I am now accurately perceiving my hands; let DREAMWORLD be a world in which I have just the experiences I have had, but that these are a part of a long and detailed dream, and so do not reflect the existence of any world of external objects -- and, in particular, I have no hands, so that my current visual experience is an illusion.

We can then argue as follows:

1. REALITY and DREAMWORLD are indistinguishable.
2. If I cannot distinguish between two situations, then I do not know which of those situations I am in.
3. I do not know which of REALITY and DREAMWORLD I am in. (1,2)

C. I do not know whether I have hands. (3)

Obviously, this argument does not rely on any special features of my hands; it could be generalized to show that I can’t know anything about any object external to my mind. So it appears to be a strong argument for skepticism.
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One response to this argument is simply to grant the conclusion: maybe we don’t really know that we have hands -- but maybe it is still rational for us to go on believing that we do.

This is difficult to believe -- outside the philosophy classroom, we do really take ourselves to have knowledge of the existence of our hands. But there is also a further problem: just as the above principle about indistinguishability and knowledge, which figures in the argument as premise (2), seems plausible, the following principles seem plausible:

2A. If I cannot distinguish between two situations, then I have no justification for believing that I am in one rather than the other.
2B. If I cannot distinguish between two situations, then it is irrational for me to form the belief that I am in one rather than the other.

But these lead to some strong conclusions:

C-A. I have no justification for believing that I have hands. (3)
C-B. It is irrational for me to form the belief that I have hands. (3)
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It is therefore hard to grant the conclusion of this skeptical argument while holding on to the idea that there is something OK about my belief that I have hands.

It might be instructive to compare the skeptical argument above to the following argument:

1*. I know that I have hands.
2*. I know which of **REALITY** and **DREAMWORLD** I am in. (1*)
3*. **REALITY** and **DREAMWORLD** are indistinguishable.

C*. Sometimes I cannot distinguish between two situations, but can know which of those situations I am in. (1*, 2*)
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These two arguments are closely related. They share a premise -- (2)/(3*).

Moreover, each argument has only one other independent premise; and in each case this premise is the negation of the conclusion of the other argument.

Which argument is more convincing? Another way to put this question is: is the skeptical argument on the left a convincing argument for skepticism, or a convincing reductio of the second premise? How would you decide this question?