

How Do the Folk Think of Seeing?

Comment on Roberts et. al., ["Folk Intuitions about the Causal Theory of Perception"](#)

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What's the best way to probe the folk understanding of a concept? The usual approach in experimental philosophy is to present hypothetical cases and instruct participants to rate the acceptability of various statements that describe them. In studies that take this approach those statements usually involve a *word* that expresses the concept in question: e.g. participants will evaluate statements about what a person in the hypothetical scenario *knows*, *intends*, or *freely does* -- where the concept in question is that of knowledge, intention, or free action, respectively.

The present study is a case in point. The authors want to probe the folk concept of visual perception, and their approach is to ask participants to rate the acceptability of statements that describe what is *seen* in their hypothetical scenarios. This is, as far as it goes, a fine strategy for operationalizing the folk understanding of a concept. Concepts are used in judgments, after all, and are expressible by the words or phrases corresponding to them.

But it's important to see that this is not the only such strategy available -- nor may it always be the *best* one, either. Consider the classic false belief test. Here, the interest is in whether someone possesses the concept of a belief, but the way to probe this is not to ask them to make or rate *statements* about what is or is not believed in a given scenario. Rather, the task involves having them *predict* what a person in a certain scenario would *do* -- e.g., whether they would look in this place or that one for the cookies that they had earlier hidden. The idea is that intuitions about what a person will do reflect one's understanding of what the person thinks or believes -- in particular, in the present case, they reveal whether or not one is equipped to understand that a person might have a false belief about how things are.

Clearly there is something to be said for taking this more indirect route to probing a person's possession or understanding of a concept. But I think it's important to see that what recommends this approach is not just that the participants whose understanding we are trying to probe may not be capable of giving verbal expression to the concept in question, whether because they are non-linguistic animals or pre-linguistic children, etc. Rather, what might also make this approach advantageous is that much of our ordinary mastery of a concept does not reside in the ability to make explicit judgments that would be expressed by statements involving the word that the concept corresponds to. For example, a large part of the way we use the ordinary concept of belief is in predicting and understanding people's actions. Similarly, a large part of the way we use the ordinary concept of knowledge is in keeping track of who is the right sort of person to ask for information about a given subject matter. And so on.

What about the ordinary concept of seeing? I think it will be uncontroversial that a lot of what we do with this concept in everyday life is similar to what we do with the concept of knowledge. That is, we use it in a form of implicit mindreading (cf. Nagel 2012) through which we keep track of who in the world is connected in a certain sort of way to the things in the world around them, such that they are able to act appropriately in regard to those things, responsibly inform other people about how they are, and so on. This mindreading does not always, or even usually, center on making *judgments* that we would express verbally using the word “see”. Rather, it's embodied in our ordinary skillful facility with people and things, in particular the way that we navigate our social world in predicting what people will do and determining who is well-positioned to answer a given empirical question. So I wonder if it's this everyday facility, and the discriminations it requires us to make, that should really be probed if our interest is in understanding the ordinary person's pretheoretical grasp of the concept of sight.

This might seem unreasonable. After all, didn't I grant that the ordinary grasp of a concept *does* ground the ability to make explicit judgments that involve the concept in question -- judgments that can be expressed by using the word or phrase corresponding to it? But in fact it's possible for the ordinary grasp of a concept to diverge from the way that we use it in explicit judgments, and this to diverge in turn from the way we use it in speech or writing. Consider the way that many people will insist that those in faraway times or places “knew” that the Earth was flat. This is not, I think, because they have a different concept of knowledge than the factive concept that philosophers take for granted. Rather, it's because they're using the word for that concept in a non-standard way -- a practice that both reflects, and then lends support to, a general puzzlement about the very idea of an objective reality. And I take it that we could best show that this is the case, not just by giving people instructions that would help to disambiguate their meaning, but rather by inviting them to make *direct* discriminations of who is trustworthy, or believable, or a reliable source of information, about these matters -- such as asking, for example, who they think is likely to come up with the right way to pilot a rocket or travel between continents. Such measures would reveal that no matter what they profess explicitly on this matter, no one *really* thinks that anyone ever knew the Earth to be flat.

As another illustration, notice how similar difficulties can arise in probing the folk concepts of intention and intentional action. The difficulty here is that *explicit* talk of intention or -- in particular -- of what is intentionally done is pretty uncommon in our ordinary discourse about agency. (If you don't believe me about this, you need to spend some more time away from philosophers.) But of course we *care* quite a lot about what people intend and do intentionally, and we keep track of these matters all the time in the way that we relate to one another and assess what we and others do. It's just that the way that we do this is not by *talking* about what people intend or do not intend, or do intentionally or not. Rather, as Hart (1948), Ryle (1949/2000), and Austin (1956) all observed, when people use the language of intention it's usually because something has gone wrong, or has been done that we think shouldn't be done, and their interest is in assessing whether this should be punished or otherwise treated as blameworthy. (Indeed, Malle surveyed the use of the words “intentional” and “intentionally” in news stories, and found that “94% of all instances concerned negative or socially undesirable events, 88% in the case of *intentional*, 99% in the case of *intentionally*” (2006, p. 95).) However,

this pattern in our verbal behavior is not enough on its own to show that the ordinary *concept* of intentional action is primarily of something bad or untoward. Nor does it even show that we *use* this concept only, or even primarily, in thinking about deeds that violate moral, social, or natural norms.¹ For as I said above, there is lots to our ordinary thinking that goes beyond what we express, or even find it natural to express, in explicit speech.

In her book *Intention* (1963/2000), Elizabeth Anscombe tries to get around this challenge by finding another set of more ordinary intuitions that can serve as a proxy for our judgments about what is intentionally done. These are intuitions about when it is or is not appropriate to ask a person *why* she did a certain thing, where this question “Why?” has a special sense which, Anscombe suggests, is applicable only to a person's intentional actions. What recommends this strategy is that we spend a lot more of our everyday life asking and answering questions like “Why did you do that?”, and citing considerations for or against treating such questions as applicable, then we do talking explicitly about what is intentionally done. This suggests that something like Anscombe's indirect route to revealing the ordinary concept of intention might actually be a better one than the strategy of asking people to judge, or rate the acceptability of, statements of what people intentionally do.

As one last example, consider the concept of personal identity. When analytic philosophers talk about this concept, we usually have in mind the conditions under which a person remains (as we say) numerically the same – that's to say, the truth-conditions of ordinary judgments of the form “*a* is *b*” (where ‘*a*’ and ‘*b*’ are proper names), “*a* φ -ed”, “*a* is the *X* that is *F*”, and so on. (Notice how much more common the latter two forms are in everyday English.) But in ordinary language, statements that *explicitly* employ the language of “personal identity” or describe someone as being or not being “the same person” seem to signify something different than this: phrases like these use the language of identity in what Vincent Descombes (2016) calls the *identitarian* sense, where its meaning is closer to the psychological notion of a “self-concept” than the (analytic) philosopher's notion of bare numerical sameness. This makes it difficult to probe people's ordinary understanding of the concept of personal identity that we *philosophers* are interested in by having them make or evaluate judgments that are naturally understood as employing this “identitarian” language – a difficulty that complicates attempts to draw conclusions about the ordinary concept of personal identity by having participants make judgments about, e.g., whether someone who has been transformed in a fictional scenario “is a different person” (cf. Tobia 2015) or “is still so-and-so” (cf. Strohminger and Nichols 2014). Arguably these judgments reveal *something* important in the ordinary concept of a person, but it's possible that the ordinary concept of a person's numerical sameness will be manifested in a different set of discriminations than these.

¹ The classic findings taken to support the “Knobe effect” – briefly, that people are more likely to judge someone to have done something intentionally if what they did was harmful rather than helpful – are also subject to this criticism. Knobe (2003) presented participants with fictional vignettes and instructed them to judge whether or not the scenario had “intentionally” done the thing in question. That these judgments were influenced by evaluative considerations does not show that such considerations are part of the ordinary *concept* of intention except on the assumption that judgments of this sort accurately reflect the structure of that concept. (For a similar point, see Nadelhoffer 2006.)

Back now to visual perception. I confess that I can't think easily of an easy strategy for probing people's grasp of this concept except by way of what they think can be judged about what people see, but suffice it to say that I think we should be careful in drawing conclusions about people's ordinary perception-concepts simply from their evaluations of statements about what people see. One reason for this is that, as the authors admit, in ordinary English the word "see" can have a non-factive meaning that's distinct from the factive concept they are trying to explore. But in addition there's the fact that phrases like "see the actual F", "it looks to S as if P", and -- most obviously -- "S visually experiences an (or the) F" don't form the core of our ordinary parlance about sight and its objects. (Consider instead: "Is the dog over there?" "What's on the table?" "How far away is the pillar?") Nor, finally, does our *parlance* about these things exhaust our everyday use of the concept of visual perception. It could very well be that we'd find out more about the ordinary grasp of this concept by finding other ways to probe what people think is seen or unseen in various real or hypothetical cases. Whether we'd find anything importantly different than the findings in this paper is obviously not a question I'm presently equipped to answer.²

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