AGAINST SENSE-DATA
AS STRUCTURED UNIVERSALS

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ABSTRACT: I critically discuss a new proposal for a metaphysics of sense-data. This proposal is due to Peter Forrest. Forrest argues that, if we accept Platonism about universals, sense-data are best understood as structured universals–in particular, as structured universals with temporal and spatial properties as components. Against this proposal, I argue sense-data as structured universals are not universals at all.

KEYWORDS: sense-data, perception, structured universals, universals, metaphysics

1. A New Metaphysics of Sense-Data

I criticize a revisionist conception of sense-data proposed by Peter Forrest in 2005. For Forrest, the object of perception (the sense-datum) is one or more structured universals.[1] I explain the 'structured' qualifier shortly. But sense-data theories are wildly unpopular. In a 2009 survey just 3.1% of philosophers reported accepting the sense-data theory.[2] So why should you care about an in-house debate among sense-data theorists?

Here are two reasons. First, whether you find a sense-data theory remotely plausible depends on what a sense-data theory is. Yet Forrest's sense-data theory is in important ways a radical departure from the standard conception of a sense-data theory. If his proposal is viable, then our definition of the sense-data theory requires correction.

Second, while sense-data have sunk into ill-repute, Platonism remains the most popular metaphysics of abstract objects among respondents to that same 2009 survey.[3] In this context, by 'Platonism' I mean "belief in possibly uninstantiated universals."[4] Now Forrest offers to cleanly solve the problem of perception if we

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[1] Peter Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXI, 3 (2005): 622.

[2] David Bourget and David J. Chalmers, "What Do Philosophers Believe?" *Philosophical Studies* 170 (2014): 476.

[3] Bourget and Chalmers, "What Do Philosophers," 475.

[4] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 622.

just grant him Platonism.[5] So if we are among the 39.3% that accept Platonism, or among the 3.1% that sorely need a more attractive version of the sense-data theory, we should seriously consider Forrest's proposal.

Let us return to the issue of the definition of the sense-data theory. Howard Robinson defines the core of the sense-data theory with two claims:[6]

> 1. Perceptual experience is *relational*: it is analyzable into an act and an object.
> 2. The object of perception (the sense-datum), is
>   a. an object of perceptual awareness,
>   b. non-physical,
>   c. private to some subject,
>   d. what possesses sensible qualities, and
>   e. not (merely or wholly) intentional or representation.

Let us see how Forrest's new metaphysics of sense-data radically departs from this conception of sense-data in (2). On his view the sense-datum is a "complex relation;" it is complex because it involves both a quality and conditions of perception. Perception of a tree, say, is a perception of a structured universal *being-tree-like-and-in-front-of-the-subject*.[7]

So far time has not surfaced, but Forrest brings the view to completion by including temporal relations as well as spatial ones.[8] Thus Forrest holds sense-data are structured universals, namely, spatiotemporally-structured universals like *being-red-and-in-front-of-the-subject-and-present-to-the-subject*: a thus-and-there-and-then.[9]

These additional conditions make the object of perception a structured universal rather than a simple universal like *redness*. Call such sense-data (that is,

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[5] "If Platonism is otherwise acceptable we'd be crazy not to identify sense-data with universals." Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 631.

[6] Howard Robinson, *Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-2.

[7] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 622-623.

[8] "Where in this paper I have used purely spatial relation in the analysis of perception we should replace them by spatio-temporal ones." Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 629.

[9] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 629. For Forrest, not *all* modes of sensory awareness include a temporal component: imagination involves a structured universal with a spatial location but without a temporal location; in contrast, memory involves a structured universal with a spatial location and an temporal location "earlier than" the time of the imagining. The temporal component in a sense datum, the *then* component, can be leveraged to distinguish memory, imagination, and other forms of sensory awareness; further, the temporal component "explains the vividness of perception as due to its present tense character." Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 630.

qualities structured by spatiotemporal conditions of perception) "atomic," as Forrest holds such sense-data admit of no further analysis.[10]

Note how sense-data, so understood, differ from traditional sense-data. Sense-data as structured universals are neither mental (as on most theories) nor physical, but abstract entities. And they are not obviously private: just as we can both be aware of the same universal *redness*, so too we can both be aware of the same universal *being-red-and-in-front-of-the-subject-and-present-to-the-subject*. Sense-data as structured universals also do not possess sensible qualities but are partially constituted by them: sensible qualities are constituents of a (structured universal) sense-datum instead of, as on the traditional version, inhering in (particular) sense-data. So (2)(b)-(d) above might need to be revised.

This new metaphysics of sense-data comes with many benefits. It offers a straightforward analysis of hallucination.[11] It solves two long-standing problems with sense-data views.[12] It solves the problem of indeterminacy in objects of perception (witness the well-worn speckled hen).[13] And it solves the problem posed by the apparent seamlessness of transition between hallucinatory perception and veridical perception (aptly described by Mark Johnston).[14] This new sense-data theory looks much more attractive (to Platonists) than the traditional theory, or at least the new theory avoids the usual objections.

2. Sense-Data as Structured 'Universals'

Problematically, this new metaphysics of sense-data is internally incoherent. For sense-data as structured universals are not repeatable, and so are not really universals. Note that being repeatable is a condition thought by many to be necessary for being a universal. Borrowing our wording from Lord Russell, a universal is distinguished by its potentially being multiply located; particulars, in contrast, cannot be multiply located.[15]

Now sense-data as structured universals, namely, as spatially and temporally located qualities, lack this distinguishing mark. For a sense datum being partly

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[10] "Atomic sensations have structure; they consist of being appeared to thus-and-here…[which] is not the same as being appeared to thus and being appeared to here." Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 622.

[11] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 623.

[12] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 623-624.

[13] Roderick Chisholm, "The Problem of the Speckled Hen," *Mind* 51, 204 (1942): 368-373, 368.

[14] Mark Johnston, "The Obscure Object of Hallucination," *Philosophical Studies* 120, 1/3 (2004): 113-183, 122-123.

[15] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York and London: Home University Library, 1912), 145.

constituted by its a spatial and temporal location implies the impossibility of its being multiply located. A quality q located at l at time t (write '(q, l, t)') is not identical with (q, l', t') if the locations and times differ; that is, if $l \neq l'$ and $t \neq t'$, then $(q, l, t) \neq (q, l', t')$. So sense-data as structured universals, to be properly called universals, must be potentially multiply located unless some non-standard distinguishing characteristic of universals is on offer. As sense-data as structured universals cannot be multiply located, they are universals in name only.

There are at least three repairs available. (1) One could claim that structured universals may be multiply located because symbols for space and time locations are *indexical*, like 'here' and 'now.' Then the current object of sensory awareness is a quality q in a here-location h at a now-time n where the location h and time n vary in referent with occasions of use. So even if one sees a quality q at distinct locations h and h' and distinct times n and n', we might still have $(q, h, n) = (q, h', n')$ because the quality q is 'here-and-now' in both cases. Yet this does not solve the problem. For 'now' means something like 'at the speaker's present time,' and similarly for 'here.' And though one can see a tree in many heres-and-nows, the meaning of 'here-and-now' differs on each occasion of the subject's perceiving. It is only by equivocating over the meaning of 'here-and-now' that one could claim that $(q, h, n) = (q, h', n')$. So we still lack a universal: in each instance of perception, the meaning of here-and-now remains a particular space-time.

(2) One can claim that all sense-data as structured universals have determinable locations or (inclusive) times, not determinate ones. So no sense-data would occupy a determinate spatial and temporal location but would be repeatable within a determinable range. But sense-data in at least some cases have a determinate location, not an indeterminate one. The sense-datum of my pen, say, is in a determinate location for a determinate (stretch of) time. So this proposal sorely needs as a supplement some account of when one's sense-datum has a determinate location and when it does not. I doubt a principled account is available here.

(3) One might revise the view so that sense-data have only a spatial component and no temporal component.[16] One could then claim that the temporal component is a feature of one's perceptual awareness rather than a feature of the sense-datum. That is, a perceiving subject is aware at time t of a spatially located

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[16] I do not find it plausible to say that a sense-datum has a temporal component but not a spatial one. First, it is not clear how to relate distinct sense-data, like two visual patches, that one perceives at the same time without appealing to space. Second, being aware of *redness-at-t* is inadequate; one would need to be aware of *an-instance-of-red-at-t*. And this is just a red particular sense-datum described in different words.

sensible quality, that is, a thus-and-there written '(q, l)'. Then sense-data as structured universals can be multiply instantiated as they are objects of temporally-distinct acts of perceptual awareness.[17]

I find three difficulties with this repair. First, it admits objects with a spatial location but no temporal location. This contradicts the current orthodoxy in physics, on which space and time are intimately bound into space-time.[18] Secondly, it introduces an ontological asymmetry between space and time. Platonic universals are constituted outside space and time; more colorfully, they exist "nowhere and nowhen."[19] (In contrast, Aristotelian universals are constituted in space and time.) Sense-data as structured universals are constituted inside space and outside time; being spatially-located qualities without temporal location, they exist 'somewhere and nowhen.' The metaphysical possibility of such objects requires some (independent) justification and explanation. I see no hope for this project.

Note also that the repair sacrifices some of the benefits of the new metaphysics of sense-data. In particular, we lose Forrest's account of memory. So I recommend that we reject the theory of sense-data as structured universals unless someone finds it sufficiently worth saving to offer an account of universals with only spatial components.

In short, repair (3) fixes the incoherence of Forrest's view. Sense-data as structured universals are now genuine universals. But the fix is unprincipled and introduces severe difficulties. It is rather like a premise offered solely because it saves the conclusion. I say we are better off rejecting Forrest's new and revisionary metaphysics of sense-data.[20]

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[17] Forrest, "Universals as Sense-Data," 628-629.

[18] Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 154. One might reply that sense-data occupy phenomenal space and time, not external world space-time. If defensible, this reply resolves the first objection. It does not answer the remaining two objections.

[19] Russell, *Problems*, 153.