Belief Acquisition Theories

1. Reminder: Our Three Principles

The Phenomenal Principle: If there sensibly appears to a subject to be something which possesses a particular sensible quality then there is something of which the subject is aware which does possess that quality.

The Common Factor Principle: Phenomenally indistinguishable perceptions, illusions, and hallucinations have an underlying mental state in common.

The Representational Principle: All visual experiences are representational.

Proponents of the belief acquisition theory accept the Common Factor Principle and the Representational Principle; they reject the Phenomenal Principle.

2. The Belief Acquisition Theory (BAT)

We think of the sensory modalities as informational systems. They provide us with information about the world.

According to this view, visual experiences are nothing more than the acquisition of true or false beliefs about the world. In the case of veridical experiences, the acquired belief is true. In the case of illusions and hallucinations, the acquired belief is false. Still, phenomenally indistinguishable experiences will all be acquisitions of the same belief. It’s just that in the illusory or hallucinatory case, that belief will be false.

BAT, First Pass: A subject S has a visual experience as of o’s being F if and only if S acquires the belief that o is F.

Problems:

(a) I can tell you that the cat is orange and, in my telling you this, you acquire the belief that the cat is orange. So, you have a visual experience as of the cat’s being orange? Surely not.

Remedy: S acquires the belief that o is F by means of the senses
Will this work? Doesn’t seem so: when I tell you that the cat is on the mat you acquire that belief by means of the senses—you hear me tell you! But you still don’t have a visual experience of the cat’s being orange.

Remedy: S acquires the belief that o is F by means of the relevant sensory organ
But: I could acquire the belief that an object was cold, hard, or sharp by placing it on my eyeball. In this case, I acquire the belief by means of my eyes. But I don’t see the object as cold, hard, or sharp.

Remedy: S acquires the belief that o is F in the standard visual way
But: Suppose I am in the interrogation room at the police station and someone holds up a sign that states: ‘THE CAT IS ORANGE’. In this case, I acquire the belief that the cat is orange by using my eyes in the standard visual way.

And there are further problems even if we set aside issues of how to formally state the theory.

(b) I might have a visual experience that something is a certain way without believing that it is that way.

E.g., Consider an illusory experience that you know is illusory. The illusion persists, but you don’t take your visual experience at face value and believe what it reports.

E.g., Dretske’s simple seeing: One might see a robin (a bird) without forming any beliefs about it.
Consider the following argument:
1. Infants and animals have visual experiences
2. Visual experiences are just the acquisition of beliefs.
3. Having beliefs involves having concepts.
4. Infants and animals don’t have concepts.
5. Infants and animals don’t have visual experiences
But that doesn’t seem right! Where has the argument gone wrong?
(d) How do we account for the acquisition of new concepts on BAT? Perceptual experience seems to be the source of new concepts!
(e) Blindsight: Certain patients with damage to brain area V1 suffer blindspots in their visual fields. Yet they are able to successfully ‘guess’ that objects occupying the area ‘covered’ by the blindspot are at a certain orientation or moving in a certain direction. That is, they acquire the belief that objects are at a certain orientation or moving in a certain direction. But they don’t have a visual experience that the objects are thus and so. (Do they?)

3. BAT and the Two Hats

The epistemological hat
Things look pretty good with respect to the epistemological hat. We have gotten rid of sense-data and we don’t have to worry how experiences ground our beliefs about the world.

The phenomenological hat
This is where things are difficult for the BA-Theorist. How can the acquisition of a belief account for what it is like to have a certain visual experience?
Now, Pitcher (a BA-Theorist) argues that we don’t acquire a single belief but rather a body of rich and detailed beliefs. The richness and detail of our experience is reflected in the richness and detail of the beliefs acquired.
Does this seem right? Would the problems above still arise?