PERCEPTION

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PREFACE

It has been supposed that there is a problem, of the "how do we, how can we, know?" variety, about what we would ordinarily say we perceive. For some reason it has been thought that the fact that we can misperceive things means that *all* perception is suspect, that what we say, even when we have not misperceived, is in need of some sort of standing justification. This will be a familiar story to anyone who has researched in the recent philosophical literature on perception. First the reader's attention is drawn to the possibility of illusion. Then it is argued that our everyday talk—the whole "language game," as a Wittgensteinian would say—is off the mark as regards the objects of perception. What we are really aware of, in perception as in misperception, are "sense-data," "sensations," "impressions," or "appearances." If our everyday talk is to be saved, the philosopher must show that it is related in a thoroughly proper way to what might be said in the sense-datum, etc., language. His task is that of *analyzing* "physical object statements" in terms of statements about sense-data, sensations, impressions, or appearances.

This, I say, is a familiar story. Some philosophers are still at it, adding new chapters or, more probably, regurgitating old ones. For the most part they manage to avoid skepticism and idealism, and end up reasonably satisfied that they have saved the world for mankind—although the world may have become a less substantial, or a less colorful, place in the process.

Other philosophers, an increasing number, are busy digging the ground from under the feet of the first ones. They are engaged in showing that the start of the story is really a non-starter. Incorrect perception is intelligible only if there is the possibility of correct perception. And so any attempt to disestablish our everyday talk is broken-backed from the start.

Worthwhile though it might be systematically to expound and examine the arguments for and against the bankruptcy of the physical object language, I think that at this stage of the game there is a fresher and more exciting task. It is that of trying to understand the climate of thought in which the argument from illusion flourished. In particular, how is it that the argument found such a ready response? Why were people so ready with alternative "objects of perception" to those underwritten by the physical object language?

If there is one historically valid answer, it lies, I maintain, in people wanting to give a causal, or a partly causal, answer to a question about perception that is not causal. The question has traditionally been referred

to as that of the relation of appearance to reality, and it is part of the climate of thought that it should not be asked what the word "appearance" means in the question.

Answers to questions beget further questions. Why should people want to give a causal, or a partly causal, answer to a question about perception that is not causal? Part of the answer, I suggest, is because they have accepted a causal, or a partly causal, answer to another question, the question "What am I?" Their answer to the question "What am I?" is reflected in their answer to the question "What is it for me to perceive something?" The answer they have accepted to the question "What am I?" is "A being distinct from all physical objects in a sense of 'distinct' which means that however closely I am connected with one particular physical object ('my' body), it is at best a causal connection." On this answer to the question "What am I?," my eyes become "my" eyes, that is, not literally a part of me, and what I am aware of in perception is "introjected" (to use Richard Avenarius's term) to become an "idea," "sensation," or "sense-impression," the effect of the senses being acted on by what is by now "the external world."

Going back still further, we encounter the question "Why have people accepted a partly causal answer to the question 'What am I?'" One answer would be: because they have been persuaded by Descartes's argu-

ment for this answer. The argument is on the following lines:

For me to think at all I must exist. Therefore, "I exist," when I think it, is necessarily true. Therefore I cannot think "I exist," and doubt its truth. Therefore I have only to think "I exist" to be certain of its truth. Therefore inasmuch as I can think "I exist" I am certain that I exist. But at the same time as being certain that I exist, I can (because I might be dreaming, be deceived by an extremely powerful malicious demon, etc.) doubt that I have a body. Therefore insofar as I am certain of my existence I am no more than a thinking being. Therefore I can think of myself existing as simply a thinking being, that is, as a being distinct from a body. But God, being omnipotent, could have made me as I can think of myself, and if God could have made me as a being distinct from a body, then I really am distinct from a body. And the closest relation I can have with something distinct from myself is at best a causal relation.

One could now try to answer the question "Why have people been persuaded by this argument?" and it would be interesting to do so; but one has to stop somewhere.

Plan of the book

I have referred to people wanting to give a causal, or a partly causal, answer to a question about perception

that is not causal. My first task is to specify what that question is. Saying that it is the question of the relation of appearance to reality is not sufficient. The word "appears," or "looks like," is used in a variety of ways, and in one of them the relation of appearance to reality *is* causal (if the laws of perspective are causal laws). In Chapter 1 I try to make clear what the sense of "appearance" is with which I am concerned. I call it the "epistemic" appearance, to distinguish it from what I call the "optical" appearance and from the "resembles" sense of "looks like." I claim that perception would not be how we find things out about the world if there were not epistemic appearances.

In Chapter 2 I note, for future discussion, D. W. Hamlyn's answer to the question of the relation of appearance to reality, the answer which consists in saying that "the connection between the way people see coloured objects and what colours those objects actually have . . . lies in our concepts." I go on to consider the Cartesian answer to the question, in terms of (a) the physical object acting on the mind via the sense organs and brain to produce a "sense-impression" in the mind, (b) a thought about the sense-impression, and (c) a thought about the "external" object that causes the sense-impression. I consider how, in terms of his theory, Descartes deals with illusions, and then introduce three objections to his theory. The first—that the sense-impression is said to be a modification of a non-extended substance, the essence of which is

thought, and yet *is* extended and is unlike a thought in that it is not true or false of anything—is dealt with by making the essence of the mind, not thinking (meaning, by “thinking,” what can be true or false of something), but privacy.

In Chapter 3 I consider the second objection to Descartes’s theory. This concerns the thought about the sense-impression which, on his theory, has to do duty for the thought that a physical object has a certain quality, such as whiteness. The implications of Descartes’s theory are made plain in what J. S. Mill says on the subject in Book I of his *System of Logic*. In brief, Descartes is committed to just such a private language theory as Wittgenstein attacks in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Having made this plain, I have not thought fit to go on to add to the literature on private languages.

In Chapter 4 I examine the account Descartes gives of the relationship between having an idea (sense-impression) and thinking there is a cause of it external to the mind. What is significant about it is his admission that, except insofar as we may be able to establish that God would not make us strongly inclined to believe what was false, we have no means of establishing the origin of our ideas. Another way of putting this is to say that the sentence “Our ideas proceed from corporeal objects” does not mean anything to us in terms of any conceivable verifying experience. One way of giving it a meaning in such terms would be to *define* “ideas proceeding from corporeal objects” as “ideas

which are attended with other ideas in a regular train or series." To this it might be objected that it would mean that physical objects come into and go out of existence as we have ideas of them. This could be avoided by bringing "possible ideas" into the definition. Then matter would be what Mill calls "a Permanent Possibility of Sensation." This is phenomenalism, acceptance of which would involve us in denying the logical compatibility of "All actual and possible sensations are such as to confirm the existence of a table in my study" and "There is not a table in my study." Their logical compatibility is, however, part of what we mean by a physical object.

In Chapter 5 I distinguish two meanings that may be given to the words "Are there physical objects?" In one they ask a question *within* the realm of physical objects; in the other, a question *about* the realm. As a question within the realm, the words merit a puzzled look, and "Of course," with the puzzled look predominating. The meaning I propose for the words "Are there physical objects?," so that they ask a question *about* the realm of physical objects, is one about the logical truths of the language relating how things appear and how things are. These logical truths are not such as to entail phenomenalism.

In Chapter 6, after recapitulating the argument of the preceding five chapters, I expound Hamlyn's argument for there being a conceptual connection "between the way people see coloured objects and what

colour those objects actually have." The crux of the argument, as I understand it, is that the truth of "Red things normally look red to us" is involved in our having the concept *red*; it is necessarily true, not in the sense of being analytic ("is red" does not *mean* "looks red under normal conditions"), but in the sense of having to be true to be intelligible; there is this conceptual, but not analytic, connection between being red and looking red under normal conditions.

Notes, Bibliography and Index

At the end of the book are (i) Notes on Reading, (ii) Bibliography, and (iii) Index. The quantity of philosophical work on perception is such as to make any attempt at an inclusive bibliography out of the question. I have listed only the works referred to in the text and in the notes on reading.