

Perceptual Realism

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Not only philosophers, but all sorts of other people as well, have disagreed over what they see when they see such things as this sheet of paper. To be sure, all do also agree to some extent—verbally at least. All do claim to see, in such a case, the sheet of paper. But when it comes to saying just *exactly* what it is that the seen sheet of paper is, and just *exactly* what seeing it consists in, there turns out to be a number of ways in which people can and actually do disagree. It is my object in this paper to discuss some points of one familiar, but little favored, view of perception and its relation to the perceived. The view I have in mind has sometimes been called “direct realism” or “naive realism”; but I shall not use either of these terms, since both seem to me to suggest views that are confused or false. Rather, I shall use the phrase “perceptual realism” to refer to the view which I want to discuss.

Perceptual realism—to speak for the moment only with reference to visual perception—is the view that what I see, when for example, I see this sheet of paper, is not something which is in any respect dependent for its nature or existence upon my *mere* perception of it. It is, thus, a view which entails, but is not equivalent to, the view that the whiteness, the rectangularity, the peculiar texture, and so on, of the paper, as well as the sheet of paper as a whole, are not *parts* or *aspects* of the total occurrence which consists of my seeing the paper; and it, of course, *also* follows from this view that there is no absurdity involved in the supposition that the paper, with *all* of its perceivable aspects, exists when no one is perceiving it. Indeed, the *possibility* is left open that, with the passing of perception, the thing perceived should be annihilated. But, if this really does happen, it is an occurrence which, according to perceptual realism, has no necessity grounded in the relation between the perception and the perceived.

One further implication of perceptual realism, as here understood, is that *if* it is true that *my perceiving* is something of which I alone can have perceptual knowledge it does not follow from that fact alone that *what I perceive* is something of which I alone can have perceptual knowledge. In other words, if, for some reason, it is true that what I see or perceive cannot be seen or perceived by anyone else, this is not due to the mere fact that what I see is seen by me. “Privacy” of the

perceived does not follow from the "privacy" of the perceiving, if perceptual realism is true.

This, then, gives the core of that "realism" which I wish to discuss. It seems to me that my statement of its thesis is in terms which, although they invite further analysis, are not confused or questionable and do not already presuppose, for their very understanding, the acceptance of any philosophical or scientific *theory*. All that is required for an understanding of the thesis is that one recognize sheets of paper as things which have shapes, colors, spatial locations, and so on, of determinate sorts; that one recognize seeing a sheet of paper as an occurrence which, in a determinate manner, is different in character from, say, having a headache, rowing a boat, seeing an apple, or hearing a bugle; and that one understand what it is for two things or occurrences to be so connected that one can exist only in conjunction with the other (e.g., as with a whole and its parts). Thus, it seems to me that this statement of realism is *philosophically neutral* with reference to its *terms*, although, of course, it is not so, nor is it intended to be so, with reference to its *claim*.

The absence of such neutrality, in common formulations of theses about perception,¹ is surely *one* of the things which accounts for the peculiarly frustrating character of the discussions of perception found throughout modern philosophy, and for the fact that the issues still stand in much the same position as they have always stood.² If the realist thesis is—as it is commonly said to be—that in perception one perceives the "external" world, or "directly" (or "immediately") apprehends "material" or "physical" things, or if it is that "sense-data" are parts of "material" objects, then the only safe thing to do is to decline to discuss it. "External," "directly," "sense-data," "material," and "physical" are terms which very likely cannot be explained except through reference to some contrast, assent to the existence of which presupposes a *theory* about, or an *analysis* of, perceiving. This means, of course, that perceiving cannot be profitably discussed in *those* terms by people who do not already partially agree on its analysis.

But if one can rightly say that the *terms* in which I have stated

¹ For various ways of stating realism, cf. Bertrand Russell, "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions," *Mind* (1904), p. 204; "The Program and First Platform of Six Realists," *Journal of Philosophy* (July 21, 1910), pp. 393-401; E. B. Holt, *et al.*, *The New Realism* (New York, 1912), p. 2, and elsewhere; D. Drake, *et al.*, *Essays in Critical Realism* (London, 1921), Chap. 1, p. 163, and elsewhere; A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Baltimore, 1956), Chap. 3; H. H. Price, *Perception* (London, 1961), p. 26.

² Prof. Grover Maxwell will do for a current and very sophisticated Descartes or Locke, while Prof. Gustav Bergmann can be our up-dated Arnauld or Reid.

perceptual realism are not philosophically contestable in the present context, one certainly cannot say the same for the *claim* of this realism. Most philosophers, it seems to me, have in fact believed that this claim is false; and I want now to consider some of the facts and arguments which compelled those philosophers to deny this claim, and which led them to hold, to the contrary, that when I see this paper, a part, at least, of what I see would not exist were I not now having just the perception which I am having.

It is well known that things do not always appear as they are, and that what is perceived varies with the conditions of perception. Whatever our final analysis of this fact may be, we are all familiar with the sort of "distortions" and variations which occur in perception and which lead to the common-sense distinction between the way things *appear* and the way they *are*. "The water is cold," we say, "but after you have been in for a while, it seems quite comfortable." Or there is the familiar case of the stick which appears bent or shortened when placed partially into water; or, again, there is the sun, which appears to be much smaller than the earth from our earth-bound point of view. There are instances of double vision, of pennies which look elliptical when viewed in certain ways, and of many more like things. In the face of all this, it would be hard to maintain that things always appear as they are; and very few philosophers, if any, have ever tried to maintain precisely that.

But the mind-dependency of the perceived, or the falsity of perceptual realism, does not follow from the mere distinction between the way things appear and the way things are. When I look at this paper under certain conditions, it looks yellow, even though it is white, and even though, while it looks yellow to me, I know it to be white. Now, there does not follow from the two propositions—that *the paper is not yellow* and that *it looks yellow to me*—the further proposition that *the yellowness (or the yellow paper) which I see, when I look at the paper, exists only in conjunction with my act of perceiving it*. Those who have thought that, given the first two propositions mentioned, this conclusion could be validly inferred have reasoned, it seems to me, in the following way: The yellow which I see must *be*, in order to *be seen*; and, being the sort of thing it is, there must be something which is yellow. Now, this yellow thing seen cannot be the paper, since the paper is white, and cannot be both white and yellow. Where, then, is the yellow thing which I see? It must be *in* the mind perceiving it, and must, therefore, be incapable of existing without the perceiving mind. (And then by further moves, which I shall disregard here, the *white* sheet seen under other conditions—

along with every other perceived thing whatever—may be swallowed up by the mind.)

I do not claim that this is the *only* argument which has been employed to demonstrate the mind dependency of the perceived; nor do I even suppose that it is a necessary part of all arguments which purport to prove that dependency. There may be arguments completely independent of this one which actually do succeed in proving the point. I am not aware of any which do so, but that perhaps only reflects my ignorance. What does seem clear is that the argument just given has, upon occasion, been used because philosophers *thought* that it did prove the point.

For example, if one looks into the first of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, he will find there an argument, about the quality of a vessel of water, which goes as follows:

Philonous: Can any doctrine be true that necessarily leads a man into absurdity?

Hylas: Without doubt it cannot.

Phil.: Is it not an absurdity to think that the same thing should be at the same time both cold and warm?

Hyl.: It is.

Phil.: Suppose now one of your hands hot and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state, will not the water seem cold to one hand, and warm to the other?

Hyl.: It will.

Phil.: Ought not we therefore, by our principles, to conclude it is really both cold and warm at the same time, that is, according to your concession, to believe an absurdity?

Hyl.: I confess it seems so.

Phil.: Consequently, the principles themselves are false, since you have granted that no true principle leads to an absurdity

Hyl.: Well, since it must be so, I am content to yield this point and acknowledge that heat and cold are only sensations existing in our minds”³

If we look closely at Berkeley's argument, we will find, I believe, that its line of reasoning must be the same as what I have previously outlined. At any rate, given only what is explicitly stated as premises,

³ Pp. 17–18 of the Library of Liberal Arts edition, and pp. 233–34 of the edition in Scribner's "Modern Student's Library." When Berkeley later comes to scuttle "primary" qualities, the major portion of his argument, from the "mite's foot" argument on, is pretty much of the same sort as the above (LLA ed., pp. 29f.; Scribner ed., pp. 246f.). Berkeley was, of course, not the last to use such an argument.

the argument clearly will not go. But by adding the propositions that *what is perceived must be* and that *things cannot be contrarily qualified* to the proposition that *the same vessel of water is simultaneously perceived to be both cold and warm*, the conclusion, that *the perceived qualities "are only sensations existing in our minds,"* may seem inevitable. Nonetheless, even these additions will not prevent this from being a rather bad argument—although an interesting one for those of us interested in the analysis of perceiving. A supporting cast of errors is required to enable it to carry any conviction with it. The cast is present in Berkeley, and it, too, is interesting. But I will not undertake to examine it here.

As to this argument itself, there are a number of objections which must be made. Ignoring the illicitness of concluding, from these premises, that *both* heat and cold are in the mind, it must surely be admitted that it is *very* far from clear what it could possibly mean to say, with the conclusion, that cold and warmth are in the mind. Hylas expresses amazement that "there is no heat in the fire." He (and Berkeley) should have been at least equally amazed by the thought that there *is* heat in the mind. For what could this suggestion mean but that some part or aspect of the mind is hot. But then, leaving the other problems with this aside, the same problem which arose about the vessel of water will also crop up about the mind; and no hint is given of why minds can be simultaneously both cold and warm, while vessels of water cannot. This surely presents the argument with a serious difficulty.

Now, Berkeley is aware of this difficulty, and he tries to deal with it in Sec. 49 of the *Principles*: "I answer, those qualities are in the mind only as they are perceived by it;—that is, not by way of *mode* or *attribute*, but only by way of *idea*. And it no more follows that the soul or mind is extended, because extension exists in it alone, than it does that it is red or blue, because those colours are on all hands acknowledged to exist in it and nowhere else." But this is merely to deny the absurd consequent of the claim that such red or blue things are in the mind, at the expense of the claim's point in Berkeley's system. The point was to preclude their being non-spiritual. But if to say they are in the mind is *only* to say, "They are perceived by it," then Berkeley's immaterialism certainly will not follow upon the demonstration that various perceived qualities are "in the mind." That these qualities are *mind dependent* or *mental* will not follow from the mere fact that they are perceived. It, perhaps, will follow from some possible sense of "in the mind" which embodies, not the mere *fact* of perception, but a certain *analysis* of that fact. The fact, as distinguished from

its possible analyses, is not inconsistent with the qualities not existing at all.

Yet, Berkeley does want to hold that they do exist—only “in the mind.” He does not wish to say (although he comes very close to saying it in the section just quoted) that there is no redness, squareness, etc., nor any things of which *they* are attributes. And he cannot put these in God’s mind *as attributes*. But the question he does not face, it seems to me, is: If they are not in something non-mental as attributes or qualities, and if they, likewise, are not in the mind as attributes or qualities, how can they be at all? And how, precisely, *they* can exist “in the mind,” without the mind being qualified by them, is something which he never explains. It seems to me, therefore, that his whole system is built upon a phrase whose meaning must be kept in the dark, and denied when it creeps into the open.

When, on the other hand, we come to look at the *premises* of the above argument by Berkeley, as I have reconstructed it, we find that the only thing not contestable there is that the water *appears* to be both cold and hot. Whether or not the portion of water could *be* both cold and hot, depends upon what the water is. And here we run upon some extremely difficult matters, which I am unable to see through. But since my aim is to concentrate upon the remaining premise of the argument anyway, I shall pass these difficulties by, only remarking that I find nothing in Berkeley’s own view of what water is to preclude the same vessel of water being cold in one “respect” (whatever that might be made to mean) and hot in another. (After all, the hands are not in contact with the *same parts* of the water.) This is not to say that I hold this to be the actual truth about the water. My point is merely that, so far as I can tell, the matter is indeterminate, on Berkeley’s view, and that, aside from his mere *assertion* that the water cannot simultaneously be cold and hot, there is nothing in his view of what water is which necessitates that this assertion of his must be so. (Indeed, his further remarks, in the section of *Principles* just referred to, and elsewhere, seem to leave the contrary possibility quite open.)

But I wish to deal mainly with the first premise mentioned in my reconstruction above, according to which whatever things *are perceived* must *be*. With regard to this premise, I wish, first of all, to try to show that it is false. Then, secondly, I shall try to bring out the mistake which has caused philosophers to believe that it is true.

Let us return to our sheet of paper. I shall try to prove, with reference to it, that some things which are perceived do not exist. There are a number of ways in which this white sheet of paper can be made

to appear yellow—e.g., by appropriate lighting, by the use of certain lenses, or just by a good case of jaundice. Now, its appearing yellow consists precisely in someone (suppose it to be me) seeing a certain yellow sheet of paper. This yellow sheet of paper seen has upon it, it is to be noted, the same words as a certain white sheet of paper which, let us say, you see, or which I can see by changing the conditions of perception. Now, if the yellow sheet of paper which I see *exists*—a yellow sheet of paper with the relevant words upon it—it must be somewhere in this room. Indeed, the yellow sheet which is seen by me (with my yellow lenses on) is, as I also see, in a certain spatial relation to this podium. It is roughly in the *same* relation to this podium as the white sheet which you see. But when we look about the podium, there are not two sheets of paper with those words on them, but only one. So either you are seeing something which does not exist, or I am. In either case, it follows that some things which are perceived do not exist.

This argument seems to me to be completely conclusive, although I do not deny that there are some ways in which one might try to avoid its conclusion. For example, it might be said that, indeed, there are not two such sheets of paper here in the room but that the conclusion still does not follow, because it was not two different sheets of paper—one yellow and one white—which were seen. Rather, it might be said, what was seen consisted of two *aspects* of *one* sheet of paper. But this surely will not do; for the “aspects” in question are of a very specific sort, and are such that *one* sheet of paper could not very well have the number of such aspects it would have to have if this suggestion were true. For it follows from this suggestion that the one sheet of paper has two different *surfaces* on *each* side. And it also follows that when one writes on, or tears up, the one, he has, by that very act, written on, or torn up, both. One gets copies without carbons, on this view, and the copies are not even on top of one another. And, of course, there must not only be two surfaces on each side of the one sheet; there must be as many surfaces there as can be seen by varying the circumstances of perception. This seems to me to be far too high a price to pay to save the premise we are discussing—that whatever is perceived must exist—and to get rid of the conclusion which we have drawn against it. To say that the side of a sheet of paper has more than one surface is to say what is false.

A second way in which one might try to avoid our conclusion, that some things perceived do not exist, is to say that one (or both) of the sheets of paper seen are “in the mind.” This view, which has had such a strong appeal to many, cannot, it seems to me, bear up under the

examination of its particulars. Just think of what the sheet of paper is: it has a certain color, flavor, odor, rag content, texture, history of movement from here to there, and certain spatial dimensions and relations. How such a thing could be a part of a mind or person is something no one has ever explained; and it surely *does* require explanation, if one is set on asserting it. Now we cannot draw out all of the odd consequences of such an assertion here. But notice that if the sheet of paper is in my mind it must also be in this room, since I am in this room. But it isn't in this room:—not even somewhere in my body. It is bigger than my head, when it is unfolded like it is; and every *other* part of my body has something else in it. So I think we can safely dismiss the suggestion that the sheet of paper is “in my mind.”

Certainly these are not the only ways of trying to avoid my conclusion that some things which are perceived do not exist. But they do seem to me to be the more probable ways, and, having dealt with them, I am going to assume that my conclusion is soundly drawn, and that, therefore, the above argument for the mind dependency of the perceived fails because, among other things, its first premise is false. My assumption at least has the virtue of allowing me to proceed to the final question I wish to discuss: *Why is it often so speedily assumed that what is perceived must exist?* Indeed, it is seldom, though sometimes, baldly stated, that the perceived must exist; but so much of what has been said about knowledge, about the characteristics and relations of “ideas,” “sensations,” “images,” and the like, has force, it seems to me, only upon the assumption that the perceived must exist. I think here, for example, of the connection between *existence*, *impressions*, and *belief*, which is proposed by Hume in Book I, Section VII, of the *Treatise*; and then there is the widespread reliance on what may be loosely called “Principles of Acquaintance,” of which Hume’s view that ideas can be legitimized only by a corresponding impression is only one form—which reliance surely rests upon the assumption that what is perceived exists. Associated with this principle is the quest for the “hard” data about which one cannot be wrong, *since* it is wholly given in perception.

But what could possibly have given philosophers all of this confidence in perception if it is true, as my simple-minded argument purports to prove, that we sometimes perceive what does not exist? What could have misled them? Dawes Hicks remarks in one place:

A mental act is not, in other words, an event which is complete in itself. In a sense the same is, no doubt, true of every event. A

physical event is dependent for its occurrence upon what is other than itself. But the dependence here in question is a dependence of a totally different order. A physical event can be described in and for itself. Not so a mental event. To speak of an act of awareness *simply* would be to speak of that which is never met with. Awareness in and for itself has no existence, and, indeed, no meaning; a “something” of which there is awareness is its indispensable correlative.⁴

Applied to the case of perceiving, these general remarks about the “mental act” mean simply that every act of perception is essentially a perception of something or other. Just as, in response to the statement that *x* is a father, it is always appropriate to ask, “Of whom?” so in response to the statement that *x* is perceiving, it is always appropriate to ask, “What?” And just as to reply to the former question by saying, “Of no one at all,” is to contradict the statement that *x* is a father, so to reply to the latter question by saying, “Nothing whatsoever,” is to contradict the statement that *x* is perceiving. Now, since the parallel between being a father and perceiving runs this far, it seems reasonable enough to extend it and to say that just as there must *be* a child in order for there to *be* a father, so what is perceived must exist in order for there to *be* a perception of *it*. Thus, there occurs a full assimilation of perceiving to other relative terms. Perceiving is treated as a relation, i.e., treated as the sort of thing the properties of which are stated by the axioms of the logic of many-placed predicates. This, it seems to me, is the reason why it is often so easily assumed that what is perceived must exist. At least it is *one* reason for this mistake.

Now, it appears to me that there are at least two sound and rather simple arguments against the view that perceiving (or, more generally, cognizing or thinking) is a relation, both of which rest upon fundamental features of relations and upon familiar aspects of human consciousness. (1) The first argument goes as follows: It very often happens that what I think of, or am conscious of (i.e., what I perceive, imagine, believe, and the like), does not exist. This must be so, for otherwise, I would only have to wish for something to produce it. Wishes would be horses (or Cadillacs) for beggars to ride. Sometimes, for example, I see double, or imagine a bear in the, in fact, empty corner, or believe something to be as it is not. But, now, I cannot be *related* to what does not exist. From Rab it follows that $(\exists x)Rax$, so that $Rab \cdot \sim(\exists x)Rax$ is a self-contradiction. Consequently, I am often conscious of that to which I cannot be related, which could not

⁴ *Critical Realism* (London, 1938), p. 8.

be so if consciousness were a relation. (2) The second argument is: a has relation R to b if and only if b has the converse relation of R to a. That is, from Rab it follows that Fba , where F is the converse of R. The sentence, $Rab \cdot (V) \sim Vba$, is, therefore, a self-contradiction, even though, in order to preserve the immutability of The Divine, certain philosophers of other ages thought it possible to maintain the truth of at least some sentences of this form. But, if this is so, then when I see this paper there is no *relation* belonging to it and consisting of being seen by me; for to be seen by me is not a fact about the paper but is wholly a fact about me. To find out whether or not the table is seen by me, I, and not the table, must be examined. If a is to the left of b, and b is examined closely, one of the things which will be discovered about b is that, with respect to a, it has the converse relation of the relation *being to the left of*, i.e., it will be found that it is to the right of a. But, however thoroughly you examine this paper, nothing about it will be found to consist in being seen by me. Or, to take a quite different kind of cognizance, examine the Taj Mahal as closely as you will, it will exhibit no relation or feature which consists of being thought by me to be in Madras. One cannot even say what such a relation or feature might be, or how, or under what circumstances, one could go about discovering it. But I do know that I am now thinking that it is in Madras. To treat my seeing the table (and my thinking of the Taj Mahal) as being relations is, therefore, tantamount to claiming that there are relations with no converse, which would be absurd. It follows again that consciousness is not a relation.

Let me sum up by retracing the line of thought traversed. Perceptual realism was defined as the view which holds the perceived object to be independent, as to existence and character, of the perception of it. I have not tried to prove this view to be true, but I have concentrated upon *one* argument against it; and, more precisely, I have concentrated upon one premise of that argument: The premise which states that what is perceived must exist. I have tried to give a conclusive reason for believing that that premise is false and have, further, called attention to a view—which, again, I have tried to prove false—for believing that premise to be true—the view, namely, that consciousness is a relation.