

Reply To Armstrong

By John Foster

THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF PERCEPTION, OF WHICH DAVID ARMSTRONG IS the originator and most illustrious advocate, claims that sense perception consists in the acquisition of propositional information about the environment. In my book The Nature of Perception, I argue that the theory is vulnerable to two main objections.

The first objection is that the theory cannot provide an adequate account of the psychological form in which the information is received. As Armstrong acknowledges, the reception need not involve the acquisition of an environmental belief, or set of beliefs, or even an inclination to such beliefs, since a subject may be convinced that his perceptual experience is non-veridical. On the other hand, it must involve more than just the entertaining of a certain proposition or set of propositions. As far as I can see, the only viable proposal is to think of the reception of the information as consisting in the occurrence of something that invites the subject to acquire the relevant belief or beliefs. But I do not see what this something could be other than a sensory experience of the kind that the cognitivist rejects.

The second objection is that, by taking it to involve nothing more than the acquisition of information, the cognitive theory fails to do justice to the phenomenological character of perception. In particular, it does not explain why perception gives its subject the impression of being the (non-conceptual) presentation of something. It is not enough for the cognitivist to appeal here to the non-inferential character of perceptually acquired information, since the clairvoyant (non-perceptual) acquisition of information would also be non-inferential. As I see it, the only satisfactory way of explaining the presentational feel of perceptual experience is by supposing, contrary to the theory, that such experience actually is, in part, presentational. How this presentational approach should be developed is something that I discuss in detail in my book.

These, then, are what I see as the two main objections to the cognitive theory, and it seems to me that Armstrong's latest attempt to defend the theory does nothing to meet them. Indeed, it does not, as far as I can see, even address them.

One issue that Armstrong does address concerns the nature of the secondary qualities, and I shall end by briefly commenting on what he says. In my book, I try to show that these qualities, in their sensible form, are ones that achieve their realization in (and exclusively in) the content of sensory experience, and this conclusion too is in conflict with

the cognitive theory. My argument for the conclusion is too complex to be summarised here. Armstrong thinks that he can meet it by taking the relevant qualities to be really microphysical properties, but ones that are, as he puts it, 'imperfectly', or 'confusedly', perceived. This puzzles me. If the microphysical properties are imperfectly or confusedly perceived, there must surely be certain other qualitative items that they are perceived as – other qualitative items that, in being perceived in that distorting way, they have the appearance of being. But I do not see what these qualitative items could be except the secondary qualities themselves – the very qualities, like sensible colour and sensible temperature, that Armstrong wants to construe as microphysical. ϕ