

The Problem Of Perception

By John Foster

§1. WHAT IS IT FOR SOMEONE TO PERCEIVE A PHYSICAL ITEM? I WANT TO PURSUE this question in the framework of physical realism—the framework of the assumption that the physical world is something whose existence is logically independent of the human mind and metaphysically fundamental. The choice of this common-sense framework might seem hardly worth mentioning. But, as will emerge, I have a special reason for doing so.

Within this realist framework, there are two rival general views of the nature of physical-item perception. One is what I shall call the *mediational view* (MV). This holds that whenever someone perceives a physical item, his perceptual contact with it is mediated by his being in some more fundamental psychological state. More precisely, it holds that whenever someone perceives a physical item, there is a certain psychological state (type-state) that is not in itself physical-item perceptive, such that his perceptual contact with that item breaks down into (is wholly constituted by) two components: one consists in his being in that state; the other comprises certain additional facts, but ones that do not involve anything further about his psychological condition at the relevant time. These additional facts will concern such things as the qualitative relationship of the psychological state to the physical item and the role of the item in the causing of the relevant realization of the state. The other position is what I shall call the *basic-relational view* (BV). This holds that whenever someone perceives a physical item, and when there is no other physical item which, in the context of that perception, he perceives more immediately, then his perceptual contact with that item is something psychologically basic. It does not, at the psychological level, break down into more fundamental factors; at least, it does not do so except (if this is possible) in a purely trivial way, when the perception

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of a complex item exhaustively decomposes into the separate perceptions of its parts.

These two views of the nature of perception are obviously mutually exclusive; at least, they are so on the assumption that we do sometimes perceive physical items. They are also, case by case, jointly exhaustive, in the sense that, taking any instance of physical-item perception, and focusing on the physical item that is most immediately perceived, we can see that the subject's perception of that item must either be psychologically basic in accordance with BV or break down into further factors in the way envisaged by MV. The problem, as I see it, is that neither view allows us to achieve, in any instance, a satisfactory account. The argument I shall present is one that I have developed in much greater detail in my book *The Nature of Perception*¹; from time to time, I shall make reference to that more detailed discussion.

I shall start by considering the situation of BV, a position that can be thought of as a strong version of direct realism.

§2. IT IS SOMETIMES THOUGHT THAT WE CAN DISPOSE OF BV QUITE QUICKLY, BY focusing on the case of hallucinatory experience and the kinds of way in which such experience can be induced.² Thus suppose, without his knowledge, scientists have attached a small radio-controlled device to someone's optic nerves, in a way that allows them to control, moment by moment, the pattern of their firings. Now imagine that, on successive days, the subject is sitting on the beach looking out to sea. On the first day, the device is switched off; a ship goes by, and, with his visual system working normally, the subject sees it. On the second day, there is no ship; but the device is activated to produce a pattern of firings just like that induced by the light from the ship on the earlier occasion, and these firings, in turn, produce an exactly similar response in the brain. As a result, the subject has a hallucinatory experience, as of seeing a ship, and we can plausibly suppose that this experience is subjectively indistinguishable from his perceptive experience of the previous day. Because, from the optic nerves onwards, the character of the neural process that occurs in the two cases is the same, it seems that we can reasonably assume that the character of the psychological outcomes will, at the fundamental level of description, be the same as well—the same not just in introspective appearance, but intrinsically. And since the psychological state involved in the hallucinatory case is not in itself perceptive, it would then follow that the psychological state fundamentally involved in the perceptive case is not in itself perceptive either. But if this latter state is not in itself perceptive, then the subject's perceptual contact with the ship, or with whatever physical item he most immediately perceives, cannot be, in the relevant sense, psychologically basic.³ Rather, it must decompose into further factors in the way envisaged by MV. And if this is so for the case of the ship, it must presumably be so for physical-item perception quite generally.

This line of argument against BV seems, at first sight, to be a

powerful one, and indeed I too once thought it decisive.⁴ But I have now come to think that the basic-relationalist has an effective reply. Obviously, if he is to maintain his position, he has to insist that, while perception and hallucination may sometimes be subjectively indistinguishable, the psychological states that are fundamentally involved in them are always intrinsically different.⁵ But I think that he has a way of doing this without embarrassment. For, in response to the fact that perception and hallucination can be preceded by neural processes of exactly the same kind, he can insist that the character of the immediately preceding process is not the only factor that is causally relevant to the character of the psychological outcome. Specifically, he can say that the character of the psychological outcome directly causally depends, in part, on the way in which this preceding neural process is itself brought about: in the particular case on which we are focusing, the way in which, on the first day, the firings in the optic nerves are brought about by the transmission of light from the ship combines with the resulting neural process to ensure the realization of a psychological state that is in itself perceptive, while the way in which, on the second day, the firings in the optic nerves are brought about by the use of the device combines with the resulting neural process to ensure the realization of a psychological state that is hallucinatory. The kinds of causal process here envisaged might seem strange when compared with the kinds of causal process we find in the physical realm. But when we take account of the special character of the psychological states which the basic-relationalist takes to be involved in perception—states that are inherently perceptive of particular physical items—the causation envisaged can, I think, be seen to be unproblematic: it can be seen to be precisely what the special character of these states calls for independently of the theorist's need to rebut the argument brought against him. This is not something that I have time to enlarge on in the present context, but I cover it in detail in my book.⁶

§3. ALTHOUGH I THINK THAT THE BASIC-RELATIONALIST CAN HOLD HIS GROUND against the argument from hallucination, it seems to me that his position fails for a different reason.

Whenever a physical item is perceived, it is perceived under a certain sensible appearance—an appearance characterized by sensible qualities associated with the sense-realm in question. Thus when an item is seen, it is seen under a sensible appearance characterized by qualities of color and spatial, or spatiotemporal, arrangement, and when an item is heard, it is heard under a sensible appearance characterized by qualities of sound and temporal arrangement.⁷ Now the sensible appearance of a physical item, though it is *of* something external, is *to* a perceiving mind. So whenever a physical item is perceived, there is something in the content of the perceptual experience that embodies the item's sensible appearance in its mental aspect—something that we might describe as the *way the subject is appeared to*. Let us refer to this

element in the experience as its *phenomenal content*. Any theory of perception is obliged to give an account of the nature of this content and of its intimate relationship to perceptual contact.

What account, then, can the basic-relationalist give? Well, I think that the position to which he would be initially drawn, partly because of its simplicity, and partly because it is in line with how we ordinarily interpret our perceptual experiences in the course of everyday life, is what we might call the *presentational view*. According to this, perceiving works like a kind of mental spotlight, a beam of presentational awareness. In its mental substance, it is perfectly transparent, having no specific internal character or content beyond its being a perceptual awareness of a certain sense-modal (for example, visual or auditory) kind; and it acquires the whole of its phenomenal content by simply being directed on to, and thereby, as it were, presentationally illuminating in the relevant sense-modal way, a certain portion, or concrete aspect, of the physical environment. Of course, the exact form of the phenomenal content that this awareness acquires depends not just on its own modality and the sensible character of the item it presents, but also on the perspective in which this item is presented. The phenomenal content of the experience of seeing a round thing from an oblique angle is not the same as that of the experience of seeing it straight on, and the content involved in seeing something in the distance is different from that involved in seeing it close to. Obviously this is something which the presentationalist must take into account. He must claim that the phenomenal content draws its qualitative ingredients from the sensible character of the item presented in a form that is relativized to the relevant presentational perspective. This 'drawing' of the qualitative ingredients is, it must be stressed, an *ontological*, not just a *causal*, matter: it is not just that the presence of an item with a certain sensible character *causes* the subject to have a visual experience with a matching content; it is that the ingredients of the content are themselves the very elements of the external situation made experientially present. The featuring of a quality in the phenomenal content is not something ontologically separate from its external realization in the perceived item (something that merely serves to *represent* that realization), but is that realization itself brought immediately before the mind.

The presentational view is the position to which the basic-relationalist would be initially drawn. But, offered as a general theory, it is open to a decisive objection. For it cannot accommodate cases of *non-veridical* perception, where a physical item is perceived, but under a sensible appearance which misrepresents its true character. That such cases occur can hardly be denied—at least on the assumption that we perceive physical items at all. The notorious case of the stick partially immersed in water (in reality straight, but appearing bent) is an obvious example—though if it were thought (surely implausibly) that the presentationalist could handle this either by assimilating it to the case of seeing veridically but in a special perspective, or by claiming that

what is immediately perceived is not the stick itself, but the light-array it transmits to the subject's eye, then we could switch our attention to such phenomena as astigmatism and colour-blindness, where the distorting physical factors lie within the subject's own visual system. In whatever form they arise, the presentational view cannot accommodate cases of non-veridical perception because, in taking the qualitative ingredients of phenomenal content to be directly drawn from the external item, it excludes the possibility of the sensible appearance of this item being at variance with its true character. Sensible appearance just is, for the presentationalist, the direct bringing of the item's actual character, in the relevant perspective, before the subject's mind.

Although the presentational view cannot deal with cases of non-veridical perception, and so cannot be accepted as a general theory about phenomenal content, there is still the option of retaining it for cases of veridical perception. So, in the case where a straight stick in water looks bent, we are forced to say that the featuring of bentness in the phenomenal content is not the featuring of some physical instance of bentness. But, in the case where a straight stick out of water looks (veridically) straight, we could still say that the featuring of straightness in the phenomenal content consists in the instance of straightness in the stick being made present to the mind. But while this mixture of approaches is an option, it is hardly a plausible one. For it is very hard to suppose that the veridicality or non-veridicality of an experience correlates with such a fundamental difference in its nature. Given that the sort of veridical and non-veridical experiences we are envisaging are alike in being physically perceptive, and that they causally originate from the perceived physical items by processes of a broadly similar kind, there is strong pressure to think of them as amenable to a unitary account. This pressure becomes, to my mind, irresistible when we focus on a case where a shift from veridical to non-veridical perception involves only very slight changes to the qualitative character of the phenomenal content and to the details of the causal process from the relevant physical item. Think, for example, of a situation in which someone first looks at an object through plain flat glass, seeing its shape as it is, and then looks at it through glass whose very slight degree of curvature imposes a correspondingly slight distortion on the way the shape of the object appears. It would surely be absurd to deny that these two perceptive experiences are, in their intrinsic character, of the same generic type.

Granted that he needs a unitary account of veridical and non-veridical perception, the basic-relationalist is obliged to conclude that, in all cases of perception, the qualitative ingredients of phenomenal content are wholly internal to the mind, rather than ontologically drawn from the physical items perceived. Let us speak of this position as the *internalist view*. Note that this view is to be taken as (exclusively) a version of BV: it combines the relevant claim of internality with the claim that perceptual contact with the relevant external item is psychologically basic.

The internalist view avoids the problem for the presentationalist: since the ingredients of phenomenal content are not ontologically drawn from the perceived item, there is no difficulty in understanding how phenomenal content can be at variance with the item's true character. But it faces problems of a different kind.

The basic problem is that it is hard to see how, on the internalist view, phenomenal content and perceptual contact fit together. There is no difficulty, in this respect, for the presentationalist: as he sees it, phenomenal content is precisely what perceptual contact automatically supplies by virtue of its presentational character—by the way in which it directly brings before the mind certain qualitative aspects of the external environment. Likewise, there is no difficulty here for the mediationalist: as he sees it, phenomenal content is the most crucial component of the mediating psychological state, and so is one of the factors that constitutively contribute to the securing of perceptual contact. The difficulty is in seeing what other option is available—what might explain how the content can embody the sensible appearance under which the item is perceived without being linked to the perceiving in either a presentational or a mediational way. It seems that, without such a link, phenomenal content will turn out to be, at best, an experiential accompaniment of perception, rather than something genuinely involved in it. And, of course, without a suitably involved content, it becomes impossible to think of the relation itself, between subject and item, as genuinely perceptual. Maybe the internalist will try to explain the involvement of content in contact in adverbial terms: perhaps he will say that phenomenal content is the experiential *mode* of perceiving, the experiential *manner* in which perceptual contact is achieved. But this is just the *schema* for an account: it does not tell us how, if not in a presentational or a mediational way, it is possible for there to be such a mode of perceiving.

One specific way in which this basic problem manifests itself is with respect to what I shall speak of as the *appropriateness requirement*. What I mean by this is the fact that, in order for a perceptual experience to be a genuine perception of some physical item, or, more precisely, to be a genuine perception which is not mediated by the perception of some other physical item, its phenomenal content has to be, to an adequate degree, qualitatively appropriate to that item. The best way to see this is to focus on a case where all the other conditions associated with perception are present, but the factor of appropriateness is conspicuously absent. Thus suppose I am in my sitting room, with my eyes turned towards the clock on the mantelpiece, with nothing obstructing my line of vision, and with all the other external factors favoring the achievement of visual contact. And suppose that light reflected from the clock and its surroundings enters my eyes in the normal way and sets up the appropriate kind of process in my optic nerves, which in turn transmits the appropriate signals to my brain. But then something peculiar happens. My brain responds to the incoming signals in a totally bizarre

way, producing a visual experience which is not remotely like the sort of experience that is normal for that kind of photic input. It might be that the resulting experience is like that of seeing something quite different, such as a football match, or it might be that its content is not amenable to interpretation in ordinary terms at all. Now it is surely clear that, given the extent of the disparity between the real character of the external environment and the content of my experience, this experience is not physically perceptive. It is true that the clock and its surroundings play a causal role in producing the experience, and, with respect to the photic input, this role is of the normal kind for the circumstances in question. And we can even suppose that, as in the case of normal visual perception, the brain response preserves a kind of causal isomorphism between elements of the resulting experience and elements of the input, so that, relative to a suitably fine-grained division, different elements of the experience causally trace back to different elements of the relevant portion of the environment. But it would be absurd to suppose that the experience qualifies as an actual seeing of this portion, and that the only way in which its deviant content affects the situation is in making this seeing radically non-veridical. It is just obvious that, in the context of the conditions envisaged, the extent of the non-veridicality precludes visual contact altogether. So here we have a clear illustration of the point at issue, that perceptual contact with the physical world requires an adequate degree of qualitative appropriateness of the phenomenal content of the perceptual experience to the physical item perceived. A point I should here mention is that, once we have rejected the presentational view, we should not think of appropriateness as entirely a matter of veridicality. For it will be partly a matter of conformity to what is normal, or normative, for the conditions of observation in question (so that, for example, the appropriate way of seeing a straight stick in water is as bent). But the precise conditions for appropriateness is not something that we need here pursue.

It is undeniable that the appropriateness requirement holds. But it creates difficulties for the internalist in two ways.

In the first place, the internalist does not seem to have any way of accounting for it. Considering the issue of explanation in the abstract, we can see two clear-cut ways in which someone could try to explain why the requirement holds. On the one hand, there is the explanation offered by the mediationalist. He would say that a sufficient degree of appropriateness is a *constitutive element* of perceptual contact: an experience that is perceptive is so partly *in virtue* of the way in which, relative to perspective, its phenomenal content is, to the relevant degree, representationally appropriate to the external item in question. On the other hand, there is the explanation offered by the presentationalist. According to him, perception just is, in perspective, the transparent displaying of the item's sensible character: there is no room for any degree of inappropriateness (which, for the presentationalist, would be the same as non-veridicality), since it is only in so far as it is drawn from the

actual qualities of the perceived item that there is phenomenal content at all. Both these accounts of perception, would, in their contrasting ways, provide a complete rationale for the appropriateness requirement. But neither of them, of course, is available to the internalist. Nor, as far as I can see, can he derive a rationale from any other source: in rejecting both the presentational and mediational accounts, he leaves himself without resources for explaining why there is any limit on the amount of inappropriateness that perception can tolerate.

The second point involves something more subtle. Although there is a limit on the degree of inappropriateness which physical-item perception can tolerate, there is surely no objective answer to the question of precisely where, in any specific type of case, this limit falls. Its precise location is surely, rather, a matter for decision; or at least, this is surely what we must accept once we have rejected a full-blooded presentational view, which excludes inappropriateness altogether. Thus suppose we have a device which can be used to distort the visual appearance of the physical scene by sending a stream of radiation through the subject's visual cortex, the amount of the distortion increasing with the strength of the radiation. And let us suppose that we are currently using this device on someone who is looking at an apple. At one extreme, with very weak radiation, we can envisage an effect on phenomenal content so slight that there is no threat to the continuation of visual contact: the subject continues to see the apple, but perhaps its apparent shape is a little warped or its surface colorpattern looks blurred. At the other extreme, with very strong radiation, we can envisage an effect so great that visual contact is clearly severed: how things appear to the subject bears no resemblance at all to how things are, and the experience cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be construed as perceptive. But, between these extremes, we can also, surely, envisage a range of cases that are inherently borderline—cases whose classification as perceptive or hallucinatory is a matter for stipulation rather than a question of objective fact. To reach such cases, we need only envisage a series, from the one extreme to the other, in which we very gradually increase the strength of the radiation and the consequent degree of effect on the subject's experience. It seems clear that, somewhere in the middle, we shall come upon cases where the question of whether the extent of the inappropriateness is sufficiently great to sever visual contact with the apple has no definite answer, even from a God's-eye view.

The existence of these borderline cases is easy enough to explain in the framework of MV, which takes a subject's perceptual contact with a physical item to be partly constituted by the fact that his experience stands in the right sort of qualitative relationship to it. For the borderline cases will then arise in this area in the way that they do in any area where, holding constant other relevant factors, the application of a concept wholly depends on whether the situation achieves a sufficient value along a certain qualitative dimension, but where there is no particular point on this dimension that marks a theoretically critical

division. Thus the existence of the borderline cases would be explained in the same sort of way as we explain why there is sometimes no objective answer to the question of whether some group of people is sufficiently numerous to count as a "crowd" or the question of whether someone has enough hair on his head to avoid counting as "bald." But, the situation of the internalist is quite different. For even if he could find some rationale for the appropriateness requirement itself, his commitment to BV would prevent him from explaining, or even acknowledging, such borderline cases. After all, perceptual contact itself, unlike qualitative appropriateness, does not admit of degrees: it is all or nothing. So if such contact is taken to be psychologically basic—something which does not, at the psychological level, break down into more fundamental factors—there is nothing at the psychological level of description which could explain how the question of its obtaining could ever fail to have an objective and fully determinate answer.

In the light of all this, it seems to me that the internalist view cannot provide an adequate account of the relationship between phenomenal content and perceptual contact. And since the presentational view has also proved unsatisfactory, and there are no other options available to the basic-relationalist, I conclude that BV itself must be rejected, and rejected for all cases of perception.

§4. WITH THE REJECTION OF THE BASIC-RELATIONAL VIEW, LET US NOW TURN TO the alternative account of perception offered by the mediational view (MV). This claims that whenever someone perceives a physical item, his perceptual contact with it is mediated by his being in some more fundamental psychological state. More precisely, it claims that this contact breaks down into two components, one of which consists in his being in a certain, not in itself physically perceptive, psychological state, and the other of which comprises certain additional facts, but ones that do not involve anything further about the subject's psychological condition at the relevant time. These additional facts concern such things as the qualitative relationship of the psychological state to the relevant physical item and the role of the item in the causing of the relevant realization of the state.

Since we have rejected BV for all cases of perception, it seems that we have no choice but to embrace MV. But the trouble is that MV too seems vulnerable to a crucial objection. For it seems that the sort of relationship which it envisages between the subject and the relevant external item would not qualify as one of genuine perceiving at all. The problem is disarmingly simple. Perceiving is, by definition, a form of awareness: to perceive something is to be perceptually aware of it. But in the situation envisaged, where the only psychological state fundamentally involved is not in itself physically perceptive, it seems that the subject's awareness never reaches beyond the boundaries of his own mind. For how can the relevant additional factors, which do not involve anything further about the subject's current psychological

condition, turn the not in itself physically perceptive state into an awareness of something external? How can they create a genuine awareness of the relevant physical item if they only concern such things as the way in which this item qualitatively relates to the psychological state and the role it plays in causing the subject to come into this state?

This point is most familiar, and seems especially clear, in the case where MV is developed along its traditional empiricist lines—the empiricist tradition of Locke, Hume, Russell, and Ayer—in which the core of the relevant psychological state is held to consist in the occurrence of a mental object of awareness: the sensory idea or sense-impression or sense-datum. For it then seems quite evident that, even if they serve to *represent* things in the external environment, these mental items are the only things of which we are genuinely perceptually aware; and if it were not for the fact that we come to interpret these items as external (an interpretation induced by the world-suggestive character of their organization), we would never even think of our awareness as reaching to anything beyond the contents of our own minds. The point is sometimes metaphorically expressed by saying that, on the traditional empiricist account, the mental objects of awareness form a kind ‘veil of perception’, which blocks our access to the external things that lie beyond.

In the cases where the mediating psychological state does not involve the occurrence of a mental object of awareness—as when, for example, the mediationalist adopts some form of cognitive account⁸ or adverbial theory⁹—the problem is less conspicuous but still there. There is now no rival class of perceptual objects to form a metaphorical veil—a barrier at which the reach of perceptual awareness can be seen to terminate. But given that the only psychological states fundamentally involved are not in themselves physically perceptive, it still seems that there will be no genuine awareness of the external environment, and that, at best, the relevant states will enable the subject to gain information about it. For it still seems that if these states do not, on their own, suffice to give the subject a genuine awareness of something external, then there is no way in which factors that do not add anything to his psychological condition could make up the deficiency. I might add, in passing, that versions of MV that do not postulate mental objects of awareness are also, in my view, unsatisfactory for a different reason, since they fail to do justice to the phenomenological character of perceptual experience. Specifically, I think that, without the postulation of these internal sensory objects, the mediationalist cannot explain why it experientially seems to the subject that there is something of which he is perceptually, and in particular presentationally, aware. Once again, this is a point that I cover in detail in my book.¹⁰

The *prima facie* objection to MV, then, is that, even if our relationship to the physical items we suppose ourselves to perceive is mediated in the way it envisages, this relationship does not meet the requirements of genuine perception, since it does not allow our awareness to reach beyond

the boundaries of our own minds. I can see only one way in which the mediationalist could try to rebut this objection. In our ordinary thinking, we seem to recognize various types of case in which the perceiving of one physical item is in some way mediated by the perceiving of another. For example, we are happy to accept that someone can watch a football match on television, when we know that his visual access to the match is channelled through his access to the patterns on the screen. Likewise, we are happy to speak of a radar operator as seeing an approaching missile, when we know that his only way of detecting it is by seeing some signal on his monitor. Or again, we think nothing of saying that we can hear the approach of an ambulance when the only indicator of its presence is the sound of its siren. Even with respect to cases that we take to be paradigmatically perceptive, it is often obvious that the subject's contact with the object in question is achieved through his contact with one of its parts. So, by all ordinary standards, I now have a clear view of the apple on the table in front of me; but obviously I only have this view of the apple by virtue of seeing a certain portion of its surface. All these seem to be cases where we ordinarily recognize the subject's perceptual contact with one physical item as mediated by his contact with another. This might be thought to indicate that our actual concept of perception is sufficiently flexible to tolerate an MV account after all. Indeed, it might be thought to show that MV cannot even be excluded when it is developed in its traditional empiricist way, where the problem for the mediationalist had seemed especially clear. For what is crucially different between a case of perceiving one physical item by perceiving another and perceiving a physical item by perceiving, or being aware of, a sensory item in the mind? It is to this supposed point of analogy that the mediationalist might appeal.

On casual inspection, such an appeal seems to offer some hope for the mediationalist, but it is a hope that evaporates when we examine the supposedly analogous cases in a more detail. What we find, when we do, is that, in each instance, there is some factor that prevents the case from lending any support to MV.

Take first the case of someone following a football match on television. There is no denying that we ordinarily think of such a subject as able to see events on the football pitch, and we also recognize that his visual access to these events is in some way mediated by his visual access to what takes place on the screen. But, in order for this to help the cause of MV, the mediation in question has to be, like that postulated by MV itself, of a decompositional kind: it has to be such that, whenever the viewer makes perceptual contact with events on the pitch, this contact breaks down into (is wholly constituted by) his contact with events on the screen, together with certain other facts. It is here that things start to go wrong. It is true that there is a way of representing the mediation as decompositional. Thus we could claim, and indeed with some plausibility, that what is ultimately going on psychologically is that the subject visually registers patterns on the screen, but sees them—

experientially interprets them—as scenes from the match. And once this claim is accepted, it will be hard to deny that such contact as the subject has with the match ultimately breaks down into this registering and experiential interpreting, together with the causal process from the stadium to the television. But the trouble with this, as a potential source of support for MV, is that, once we have represented the mediation in these decompositional terms, it is no longer plausible to suppose that what is mediated is genuine perception. For the same considerations that seemed to show that, on the traditional empiricist version of MV, our perceptual awareness does not reach beyond the sensory items in the mind, would now lead us to say that the television viewer's perceptual awareness does not reach beyond the patterns on the screen. The only way we can plausibly think of the viewer as genuinely seeing the match is by taking his visual contact with it to be psychologically basic, and construing the mediational role of his access to the screen as merely causal—as consisting in the fact that his reception of light from the screen is an essential part of the causal process by which events on the pitch become visible to him. This would accord with how things experientially seem to the viewer himself, and, because of our own first-person familiarity with the televisual experience, it is how we tend to understand the situation in our ordinary thinking. But thus construed, the television case would obviously not provide an analogy for what is envisaged by MV, since the envisaged mediation would not be of the analogically relevant kind.

The case of the radar operator is equally of no help to the advocate of MV. There is no denying that such contact as the operator has with the missile is mediated by his perception of the signal on the screen and that this mediation is of a decompositional kind: the contact breaks down into the perception and recognition of the signal, and the causal link between the signal and the missile itself. And, in this case, unlike that of the television viewer, we are not, even in our ordinary thinking, inclined to understand the situation in any other way, since there is nothing in the phenomenology of the radar-monitoring experience that might tempt us to a different conclusion. But the trouble, once again, is that, once we take account of the decompositional nature of the situation, we are prevented from thinking of the contact with the missile as genuinely perceptual. Indeed, even in our ordinary thinking, we recognize it as obvious that the operator does not really see the missile, but merely detects its presence by inference from the signal. If, in ordinary usage, we are happy to speak of him as seeing the missile, this is only because ordinary usage does not aim to describe things as they strictly are. All these points also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of the ambulance and the siren.

There remains the case of perceiving a whole object by perceiving a part; and, at first sight, this may seem to be the ideal case for the defender of MV. On the one hand, there is no disputing the claim that the contact with the whole item is compositionally mediated by contact

with the part. Thus, whatever visual contact I can be said to have with the apple on the table in front of me, it is obvious that it breaks down into my contact with the relevant portion of its surface and the fact that this latter item *is* a portion of the apple's surface. On the other hand, the decompositional nature of the situation does not, in this case, make it difficult to accept that the contact with the whole object is genuinely perceptual. There is no temptation to say that, because all that is immediately visible to me is a certain portion of its surface, I do not really see the apple itself. On the face of it, then, we have here exactly the right sort of case for mediationalist's purposes—a case in which there is genuine perception combined with decompositional mediation. But, on reflection, I think we can see that the case could not be less helpful to his cause. For what here allows us to recognize the combination of genuine perception and decompositional mediation is that the two putative perceptual objects involved are not, as in the other cases we have considered, ontologically separate, and so are not thought of as competitors for the title of being what the subject really perceives. There is no difficulty in understanding how, in seeing a certain portion of its surface, I am seeing the apple itself, since contact with this portion just is contact with the apple in a locationally focused form. This cannot provide any analogical support for the mediational claims of MV. Even when MV is developed along its traditional empiricist lines, where the mediating psychological state involves an object of awareness, this object is located in the mind, not in the external world, and so has to be, on a grand scale, ontologically separate from the physical item supposedly perceived.

I have considered three types of case where it might be thought that the perceiving of one physical item is mediated by the perceiving of another, and none of them provides any analogical support for MV. In the case of the television viewer, the only way we can think of the subject as genuinely perceiving the football match is by taking the mediating role of his access to the screen to be merely causal. In the cases of the radar operator and the ambulance, there is no denying that the mediation involved is decompositional, but there is equally no question of thinking of the contact with the more remote item as genuinely perceptual. Finally, in cases like that of the apple, we must accept that there is both genuine perception and decompositional mediation, but, unlike anything that might be envisaged under MV, the two perceptual objects involved are not ontologically separate. Although there are other types of case that could be considered, I cannot think of any that would not fail, as something that might help the cause of MV, in one of these three ways, where either the relevant mediation is not decompositional, or the supposed remote perceptual object is not genuinely perceived, or the two perceptual objects are not ontologically separate; and, in consequence, I think that the appeal to the supposed analogy is unsuccessful.

With the failure of this analogical appeal, the original objection

to MV stands, and I can see no further way in which it might be resisted. Our relationship to the physical items we think we perceive may well be as MV characterizes it; indeed, it seems that it *has* to be so if BV stands discredited. But if it is, then this relationship does not meet the requirements of genuine perception, since it does not allow perceptual awareness to reach beyond the boundaries of the mind.

§5. IF MY ARGUMENTS HAVE BEEN RIGHT, THEN NEITHER BV NOR MV ALLOWS US to achieve a satisfactory account of physical-item perception. The problem with BV is that we simply do not have the kind of psychologically basic contact with physical items that it envisages; indeed, if there is to be provision for non-veridical perception, the kind of contact it envisages seems to be impossible. The problem with MV is that, while it is plausible to take our contact with physical items to be mediated in the way it envisages, such contact does not qualify as genuinely perceptual. Granted that BV and MV are, case by case, jointly exhaustive, we seem to be forced to the conclusion that we do not perceive physical items at all. This is a hugely unpalatable conclusion, not merely because of its affront to common sense, but also because all our beliefs about the physical world are founded on the assumption that perceptual access to the world is available.

As I see it, the only way in which we can hope to avoid this unwanted conclusion, and the epistemological havoc it would wreak, is by dropping the assumption of physical realism on which our whole discussion has so far been based. For, without this assumption, we would be free to embrace an idealist account of the physical world, and such an account, suitably developed, would allow us to eliminate the problem of perception at a stroke. Thus if we were to construe the world as something which is logically created by (or perhaps by something whose central component consists in) facts about human sense-experience—in particular by the physically thematic ways in which our sense-experiences are organized—we would no longer need to think of perceptual awareness as having to reach beyond the boundaries of the mind to make contact with the physical items themselves. The occurrence of a sensory experience could qualify as the perceiving of a physical item simply by virtue of its fitting into the overall organization of such experiences in the appropriate way.

The fact that idealism is the only position which allows for physical-item perception does not, of course, establish its truth; and there is no denying that it, in turn, faces a number of *prima facie* problems. Even so, the difficulty of accepting that we have no perceptual access to the physical world should at least lead us to give serious consideration to the idealist option. I have set out elsewhere the further steps by which I think that an idealist account of an appropriate kind can, in the end, be fully vindicated.¹¹ ◻

Notes

¹ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

² See, in particular, H. Robinson, 'The General Form of the Argument for Berkeleian Idealism', in J. Foster and H. Robinson (eds), *Essays on Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 170-7, and *Perception* (London: Routledge, 1994), 151-62.

³ At each time over the relevant period, what the subject *immediately* perceives will be some slightly earlier time-slice of a certain portion of the ship's surface.

⁴ Thus see my *Ayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 147-9, 161.

⁵ In other words, he has to accept what is known as a *disjunctive* account, in line with the proposal of J. Hinton in his *Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Other advocates of this account have included P. Snowdon, 'Perception, Vision, and Causation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 81 (1980-1), 175-92, and J. McDowell, 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), 455-79.

⁶ See *The Nature of Perception*, 23-43.

⁷ Not all forms of appearance count as sensible in the relevant sense. For example, a path's looking dangerous or a preacher's sounding pompous are not sensible in this sense. For an account of what is distinctive about sensible appearance, see my *The Nature of Perception*, 44-51.

⁸ For example, see D. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), ch. 10, and G. Pitcher, *A Theory of Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁹ For example, see C. Ducasse, 'Moore's Refutation of Idealism', in P. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1942), 223-51, and R. Chisholm, *Perceiving* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957), 115-25.

¹⁰ In *The Nature of Perception*, Part Three.

¹¹ In *The Case for Idealism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 'The Succinct Case for Idealism' in H. Robinson (ed.) *Objections to Physicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *The Nature of Perception*, Part Five.