

Sense-data and Senses*

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Sense-data are wrongly named: they are not at all what we are *given*. We are not given visual sense-data, for example: what we are given are scenes of a street, or a room, of fields, or a wood, of the sky with the sun and clouds, or with the moon and stars. Only with great intellectual effort can we break the scene down into visual sense-data; it is as difficult to do so as to hear one's own language spoken as one would hear it if it were a language of which one knew nothing, or to see it written as one sees an unfamiliar script. It is doubtful whether many philosophers who talk about sense-data ever make such an effort successfully. They speak of visual sense-data as if they were always purely two-dimensional, whereas the experience of looking at a terrestrial scene with both eyes undoubtedly differs from that of looking at it with only one, having covered the other eye. A scene, though not a mere conglomeration of sense-data, is *visual*: we see reflections, shadows and rainbows, and these are part of the scene we see.

When we try to identify the visual sense-data we are receiving as we look upon a scene, we attempt to strip away the interpretation we are putting on them in perceiving it as a scene of this or that kind. Very much of our interpretation of sense-data is automatic; but sometimes conscious enquiry is needed. We hear a sound and cannot identify it or tell where it is coming from; or we feel something with our fingers and cannot make out what sort of material we are touching. The interpretation that comes automatically we had to learn as infants: it cannot be thought that a man bom

* We would particularly like to thank Michael Dummett for his contribution to this volume. Unfortunately, Professor Sir Dummett had to cancel his participation in the conference at short notice. He did, however, send us his text in advance. The paper printed here was read out and discussed during the conference. We are especially honoured since Michael Dummett mentioned in a letter that he had actually decided not to write anymore philosophy shortly before he received our invitation to the conference.

blind who suddenly received his sight, like the one in the Gospel, would immediately understand what scene was presented to his eyes. But once learned, it ceases to constitute thought applied to our experience: it becomes *part* of our experience. Sometimes, indeed, we misinterpret what we see; but it would be nonsense to ask for that reason whether there is in truth anything in external reality we are perceiving, misinterpreting or misperceiving. By our perceptions, as well as what is reported to us by others, we build up a map of the world around us. It is when subsequent perceptions fail to tally with this map that we realise that we have misperceived or misinterpreted. The agreement of present perceptions with subsequent ones is the criterion for their delivering a correct report of external reality; doubts whether there is such a reality are simply senseless.

In the same way, when we are spoken to in our own language, or any other language that we know, we seldom need to make an effort to recall the senses of the words: they come to us laden with their senses. Though we indeed hear the words, and can repeat the words we have heard, we cannot hear them save as bearing the senses they carry. Sometimes we misunderstand what is said to us: the criterion for our having attached the correct sense to the words is that it fits with what the speaker goes on to say or do, and with what others who use those words say and do. It would be senseless to doubt whether the words really bear objective senses, on the score that we sometimes misunderstand them. No philosopher has committed this folly, setting an Argument from Misunderstanding alongside the Argument from Illusion; nor has any laboured to devise a refutation of it. But scepticism about the external world that appeals to our sometimes being mistaken about what we perceive is classically treated as requiring clever argumentation to refute it, although it is no less absurd than scepticism about whether words have senses, and for much the same reason. Perhaps the error has been to overlook the analogy between the two kinds of misbegotten doubt. In both cases we are interpreting what we see or hear, so unconsciously that we are not normally aware of doing so, the act of interpretation becoming a component of the experience of perception, in both cases there is in fact a gap between the purely sensory impact and what we are conscious of seeing or hearing. In the case of hearing or reading a piece of language this gap is more glaring than in that of sensory perception, but this does not nullify the analogy. The gap is evident from

there being many human languages, as we are all very well aware; even if there were only one, perhaps the gap would be less evident if learning language were not so prolonged a process, and one in which adults participate as teachers.

There are instances of universal illusions: cases in which, without special knowledge, every observer will misdescribe the objects that he sees. But, when we are suffering no such illusion and are interpreting what we see correctly, are we seeing it as it really is? Well, the hypothesis is surely that we are doing so; if our description of what we see did not tally with how it really is, we must be subject to illusion or misinterpretation. But are we seeing it, not just as it would be correct to describe it, but as it really is in itself? Those who say that physical objects are not really coloured do not mean that it will always be incorrect to call them yellow or green: they mean that so to describe them – and mean by doing so that they have this or that phenomenal colour, the colour as we see it – is not to say what they are like *in themselves*, but only how they appear to us. Now certainly our unaided senses can tell us a good deal about an object, but very far from everything. When we know how an object looks, feels, smells and tastes, we know a great deal about it, but there is much more to know. It may be conceded that to know what an object is like in itself must involve knowing *all* about it – possessing a full description of it as it presently is – and that to know so much may require a knowledge of physics and chemistry, and probably a good bit of mathematics; but this is not the point. The question was whether, when we correctly describe an object as we perceive it through our senses, our description will form part of a characterisation of it as it is in itself, or whether it must rank merely as an account of how the object affects us. Well, we see an object in a certain light, from a certain distance and in a certain direction. All these circumstances go to determine how it looks to us, but none is intrinsic to the object as it is in itself. But we can be asked to say what, from looking at it, we take the object to be like in itself, rather than how it looks to us at the moment. And when we do this, we shall certainly mention its colour.

We can see an object only as it appears to us. We may be able to determine a good deal of how it is in itself, but there could be no such thing as *seeing* it as it is in itself. Sense-perception is not the revelation of an object to a passive subject: it is an interaction, of the perceived object and the

perceiver. A physical object interacts with other objects according to laws of nature. It can be characterised as it is in itself solely in mathematical terms. It manifests itself to sentient beings according to their particular sensory equipment. It is necessary that it should appear in different ways to different kinds of sentient being, because their perception of it is an interaction between it and them. We see it as it appears to human beings (in my own case, to slightly colour-blind human beings). It presses on us to wonder whether some object at which we are looking really is, in itself, as it appears to us; does it *really* look like that, feel like that, sound like that? In fact the question is nonsensical. It is nonsense because its appearance to us is an interaction between it and us: it can look a certain way only *to* a viewer. The object itself is not an interaction, but something that interacts with us and with others: it is nonsense to speak of its looking this way or that save to one who looks at it.

In *Thought and Reality* I argued that a description completely devoid of terms whose meaning is given partly by reference to our experience or position could present the object it so characterised only as an abstract mathematical model. I went on to say that it does not make sense to say that that is what an object in the world is really like in itself. It is true that it would not make sense to say that what was given in such a characterisation was all that there was to a material object. But we are under no pressure to say that. A material object has a complex potentiality to interact in a variety of ways with diverse other objects and with fields of force associated with them; mathematical objects do not interact with other mathematical objects. Material objects interact with one another in accordance with scientific laws that depend upon the constitutions of each. These constitutions may be characterisable in mathematical terms; but they are not all there is to the objects. What makes them actually existing physical objects is their having a position relative to other objects and their potentiality to interact with those objects. A material object has not been fully characterised when it has been described as we find it to be by examining it: this must be supplemented by an account of its potentiality to interact in diverse ways with other objects.

Material objects interact with other material objects, and interact differently with different kinds of material objects. They are characterised in large part by how they interact with different kinds of other material ob-

jects. But with which other material objects does a given material objects interact? With those that come in contact with them, or that emit radiation that impinges on them. This is why material objects of necessity inhabit a space within which they can move, or at least within which other material objects, capable of coming into contact with them or of broadcasting or reflecting radiation, are able to alter their position: material objects are of their nature spatio-temporal.

Unlike material objects, senses are properties. The senses of which we naturally think are senses *of* words or phrases in a language or dialect; they are properties of those words or phrases. Is everything that is 'of something else a property of that other thing? Clearly not: a portrait of a person, or a photograph of a person, is not a property of that person. It is not just that we could not grasp what a sense is without understanding that it is or may be the sense of some word or phrase: we could not grasp what a portrait is without understanding that it must be the portrait of some person. It is also that senses are not objects of some general kind, restricted by their relationship to some word or phrase whose sense they are. Portraits are works of art – paintings, busts, sculptures or photographs – which have a special relationship to their subject or subjects (for a portrait may portray more than one person). The subject must be an actual person (or small set of persons). The portrait must depict the face or faces of that person or those persons (perhaps, but not necessarily, exclusively). The intention of the work must be to show the appearance – and perhaps also the character – of the subject or subjects. The relationship that a work of art must have to one or more persons to be a portrait of him, her or them is fairly complex; but its complexity is irrelevant to the present distinction. A portrait is a work of art that has that relationship to its subject: but we cannot say that a sense is a whatnot that has a particular relationship to some word or phrase. There is no way in which the meaning of "whatnot" could be explained here. It is that fact that makes senses properties of the words or phrases of which they are the senses.

It does not follow that every sense is the sense of some actual word or phrase in an existing or dead language. There is a Chinese word (written with a single character) which applies both to playing cards and to dominoes, Ma-Jong tiles and the like. The concept is easily grasped, but we have in English no word or easily formed phrase that expresses it. Here we

have a sense which is not the sense of any English word or phrase. Senses may be compared to directions. Any one specified place on the Earth's surface lies in a particular direction from any other specified place. But there can be directions in which no specifiable spot lies from any other specifiable spot. Likewise there may be many senses that are not the senses of any word or phrase in any language.

We speak of many different sorts of object – individual animals and people, species, stars, constellations, political parties, political theories and so on. Here we have considered two sorts – senses and sense-data. Sense-data are the results of our efforts to break down our sense-perceptions into elements corresponding to the elements of the purely sensory impact of those perceptions. Senses are the results of our attempts to analyse the contributions of particular words and phrases to the expression of our thoughts by sentences containing them. Together, they provide admirable examples of the conceptual mechanisms by means of which we seek to catalogue the components of the world which we inhabit.