Molyneux’s Question
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Vision, Touch and the Philosophy of Perception

MICHAEL J. MORGAN

Department of Experimental Psychology
University of Cambridge

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Preface

This book is primarily about the views of eighteenth-century philosophers on the experiences of the congenitally blind. I have tried to explain why this was such an important issue at the time in the context of the debate about ‘general ideas’. My main motive in writing this account is the belief that the views of Locke and Berkeley have undergone serious distortions in the modern psychological literature. I also wish to bring to the attention of English-speaking psychologists the very rich thought of Diderot and Condillac. In no way is this work intended to be a review of present-day knowledge about perceptions of the blind. The very extensive nineteenth-century literature on this question is only alluded to in the present work. I have tried to explain something of Kant’s influence in a separate chapter on Hermann Lotze; and a certain amount of recent research is reviewed in the Afterword, because of its general interest; but a full treatment of the post-Kantian era would require a separate work.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the very generous help that I have received from James White (with French translation and political history), from John Mollon (particularly on the optical illusions), from Edward Craig, who corrected some of my philosophical misunderstandings, and from Professor Zangwill, who has advised me throughout. They would not necessarily wish to be associated with the particular ideas expressed here, and final responsibility for any errors must remain with the author.