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Frank Jackson

Excerpt

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Introduction

o. In this book I argue that the correct philosophical theory of perception is a representative one. By such a theory, I mean one which holds

- (i) that the immediate objects of (visual) perception are always mental;
 - (ii) that there are objects, variously called external, material or physical, which are independent of the existence of sentient creatures;
 - (iii) that these objects have only the primary qualities;
- and
- (iv) to (visually) perceive a material object is to be in a certain kind of perceptual state as a causal result of the action of that object.

(The restriction to visual perception – seeing – is to be understood throughout.)

With the exception of clause (ii), these clauses are defended in the chapters that follow. Clause (ii) is, however, an assumption. I assume, that is, that Idealism (Phenomenalism) is false. I take it that we are a very small part of a universe that existed millions of years before we did and will exist millions of years after we have gone. The reason I do not defend the assumption is threefold: first, space; secondly, I have little to add to the criticisms of Idealism by writers like D. M. Armstrong,¹ Don Locke,² and J. J. C. Smart;³ and, thirdly and most importantly, the main reason Idealism has been seriously entertained is the belief that its competitors – Direct Realism and Representationalism – face decisive objections; and I argue that Representationalism does not face decisive objections in chapter six.

Clause (i) is defended at the greatest length – as it ought to be; it is

¹ *Perception and the Physical World*, chs. 5 and 6. (Full bibliographical details are given in the bibliography.)

² *Perception and Our Knowledge of the External World*, ch. 4.

³ *Philosophy and Scientific Realism*, ch. 2.

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the one which nearly all writers on perception today reject. Its defence requires the conclusions of the first five chapters, the structure of this defence being indicated as we progress through them.

Clause (iii) is defended in chapter five. In this chapter it is argued that scientific investigation of the material world strongly supports the contention that material things have only what I call scientific properties, which turn out to be pretty much Locke's primary qualities.

Clause (iv) is defended and explained in chapter seven. The explanation draws on the sense-datum theory espoused in chapter four.

The role of chapter six is essentially negative: it presents objections to the familiar objections to Representationalism.

1. The philosophical viewpoint from which this work is written is to a considerable extent traditional. In the arguments of the following chapters traditional analytical terms like: 'analysis', '(logical) possibility', 'contingent', 'entailment' and 'necessarily true' play a prominent role.

I cannot defend this viewpoint here, for that would require a book in itself. But I think I should say something about why I adopt it.

One reason is simply that I do not find the criticisms of such concepts by, for instance, Morton White⁴ and W. V. Quine⁵ convincing. But there is a second reason which should, I feel, carry weight even with those who take Quine's and White's criticisms seriously.

Around the turn of the century, it was known that there was something badly wrong with Newtonian Physics, but it was not known what should be put in its place until Einstein's Theory of Relativity was proposed and became established. However, the physicists of 1900 did not stop work; rather they used the best theory they then had, in the full knowledge that it was inadequate. Likewise, physicists today who believe that certain paradoxes show that there is something fundamental amiss in current quantum theory do not stop using it; rather they use it because it is the best they have to date.

Now it seems to me beyond question that the traditional notions that make up the so-called intensional circle are the best we have to date: there is wide-spread, non-collusive agreement about their application; there are accepted axiom systems embodying the central notion of logical necessity; and we have semantics of a set-theoretic kind for these axiom systems. This is far more than we have for the suggested replacement notions like: paraphrase, degree of revisability, distance

⁴ In, e.g., *Towards Reunion in Philosophy*.

⁵ In, e.g., 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'.

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from the periphery of experience, and so on. At best, all we have for these notions are preliminary sketches that might serve as bases for fuller explications in the future. Indeed, as has been often noted, the clearest current accounts of these notions appear to presuppose the old notions. For example, the clearest account of the degree of revisability of a statement is in terms of the extent of revisions in a person's beliefs *consequent* upon abandoning that statement. And the relevant notion of consequence appears to be logical consequence, that is, entailment.

In short, it seems to me that someone who refuses to employ the traditional notions at all is like one who says, to borrow a phrase, 'I see it is wrong to build on sand, therefore, I will build on nothing at all.'

In any case, what is quite certain is that, if we are to use the traditional notions, there is no point in using them sloppily just because they face philosophical problems – two approximations take one further from the truth, rather than 'cancelling out'. Or, to borrow a maxim from morals, two wrongs do not make a right. It seems to me quite wrong to put forward analyses to which there are clear counter-examples and then try and excuse this fact by reference to, say, Quine's criticism of synonymy: this is to seek to have one's cake and eat it too. Either one eschews the notions in question altogether or one uses them as precisely as possible.

2. Finally, two matters partly concerning philosophical viewpoint and partly terminology.

Clause (i) of the statement of Representationalism in §0 above uses the term 'mental'. The question of how to define the mental is, rightly, highly controversial. All I will attempt here is to describe my usage in as philosophically neutral a way as possible, while going beyond merely giving the usual list: pains, desires, hopes, etc.

I take it that we have a reasonably clear conception of a sentient creature: that of which we (persons) and the higher mammals are prime examples, and rocks are prime non-examples. What I mean by 'mental' is what we *qua* sentient creatures bring to the world; what there could not be if there were no such creatures. Of course there are difficulties here, but we must make a start somewhere; and this account at least enables us to give direction to arguments over whether something is mental: *As* are mental just if there could be no *As* if there were no sentient creatures. It is important to notice the generality here: '*As*', not '*this A*'. My car could not exist without a sentient creature, me – at

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least in one clear sense, that given by noting that 'My car exists without my existing' is an inconsistent statement. But cars could exist without sentient creatures, they could, for example, have been made by automatons or have come into existence spontaneously.

The second matter concerns the usage of 'see'. I will use this in the ordinary sense according to which 'Jones sees the tree', for example, entails that the tree exists; and according to which Macbeth did *not* see a dagger for there was no dagger for him to see, though he may have *thought* he was seeing a dagger and it was, perhaps, *as if* he were.

Of course, from the fact that Macbeth did not see a dagger, it does not follow that he saw nothing. There are two views that can be taken concerning hallucinations.⁶ One is that they exist and are seen, but are not, of course, material or physical. On this view, Macbeth saw something, albeit a non-physical something. Alternatively, it can be held that Macbeth saw nothing, and that when under hallucination one sees nothing (relevant) at all, either physical or mental. On this view, one should not really talk about hallucinations at all, for there are none; rather there are cases of *hallucinating*. (I return to this question at length in chapter three.)

The one thing that I think cannot be said is that 'Macbeth did see something, and that something did not exist',⁷ or, concerning hallucinations in general, 'people can and do perceive things which do not exist'.⁸ For there are no things – perceived or not – which do not exist. Perhaps when hallucinated one sees nothing – though I will argue against this in chapter three – but one thing is certain: nothing is not a very special, non-existent thing which one sees when hallucinated.

It sometimes seems to be thought that we can side-step the whole issue of whether 'see' has 'success grammar' or 'existential import', by arguing as follows: Let us grant that 'see' as used in current English licences inferring '*D* exists' from '*S* sees *D*'. But, for various reasons, this usage is philosophically inconvenient; hence we should conduct our discussion in terms of 'see*', where 'see*' means just what 'see' means, except that '*S* sees* *D*' does not entail '*D* exists'.⁹

⁶ I follow the fairly standard practice of using 'illusion' for cases where something material is seen which looks other than it is, thus the straight stick in water looking bent is an illusion; and of using 'hallucination' for cases where nothing material is seen, thus after-images are hallucinations.

⁷ Don Locke, *Perception and Our Knowledge of the External World*, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ I take this to be A. J. Ayer's view in *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, ch. 1.

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There is, however, a fundamental problem with such a procedure. Consider someone writing on the secondary qualities who observes that '*X* is red' entails that *X* is coloured, and decides to introduce the term 'red*' to mean precisely what 'red' means except that '*X* is red*' does not entail that *X* is coloured. The question such a procedure obviously raises is whether the deletion of the entailment to '*X* is coloured' leaves anything significant behind. And it is hard to see how to settle this question other than by considering whether '*X* is red' may be analysed as a conjunction with '*X* is coloured' as one conjunct and some sentence, *P*, not entailing '*X* is coloured' as the other. If it can, '*X* is red*' means *P*; if not, 'red*' has no consistent meaning at all.

Likewise, whether or not there is anything meaningful corresponding to 'see*' depends on whether '*S* sees *D*' can be analysed as a conjunction with one conjunct as '*D* exists', and the other not entailing that *D* exists. Therefore, the question as to whether it is fruitful to introduce 'see*' cannot be raised at the *beginning* of a philosophical discussion of perception, but only after enough has been said to enable an opinion on the possibility of the required kind of conjunctive analyses.

More particularly, the issue turns out to pivot – as we will see in chapters three and four – on whether 'see' is essentially *relational*. '*A* is to the left of *B*' entails that *B* exists, but this is no 'mere verbal convention' or quirk of English usage. For there is no analysing it as '*A* is to the left of **B* and *B* exists', where '*A* is to the left of **B*' does not entail that *B* exists – if there were, Logic could dispense with many place relations.

Finally and briefly, I suppose 'see' to be such that '*S* sees *D* and *D*=*D*' entails that *S* sees *D*'. That is, '*D*' is here subject to substitutivity (of co-referring terms) and so '*S* sees —' is a transparent construction.¹⁰ If I see the friendly-looking dog and the friendly-looking dog is about to attack me, then I see the dog who is about to attack me, whether or not I am fortunate enough to know the fact. This view receives a detailed defence in G. J. Warnock's, 'On What is Seen'.¹¹

¹⁰ In the sense defined in W. V. Quine, *Word and Object*, §30.

¹¹ See also his earlier, 'Seeing', and Fred. I. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*, p. 54ff

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I

The distinction between mediate and immediate objects of perception

o. Before I can argue that the major claim of the Representative Theory of Perception (RTP) that the immediate objects of perception are always mental, is true, we must see what it means; and, in particular, what ‘immediate object of perception’ means. This is the concern of this chapter.

1. We talk of seeing things and of seeing *that* . . . : ‘I see the tomato’, ‘I see *that* the tomato is red.’ In the first case, ‘see’ is followed by a singular term putatively naming something; in the second, by a sentence prefixed by ‘that’. (We also talk of seeing events, processes, etc.: ‘I saw the explosion’, ‘I saw the steady erosion of the river bank.’ But I will concentrate on the first two cases here.)

In starting with the question ‘*What* are the immediate *objects* of perception’, I am opting for the view that seeing things is more basic than seeing-that. The best warrant for such a view would be (i) a successful analysis of seeing-that in terms of seeing things, plus (ii) an argument that showed that the converse – an analysis of seeing things in terms of seeing-that – is impossible. Such a warrant will be offered in chapter 7.

In any case, the distinction between mediate and immediate perception, as conceived here and by traditionally minded writers on perception like G. E. Moore and H. H. Price pertains to perceiving things, not perception-that. For the distinction is introduced as a preamble to discussing *what* we immediately perceive. It is a preliminary to considering the nature of the immediate *objects* of perception. We shall see that some versions of the traditional ways of drawing the mediate–immediate distinction appear to overlook this point.

I believe that the usual formulations of the mediate–immediate distinction fail. I will argue this principally for D. M. Armstrong’s formulation in terms of inference and suggestion, for H. H. Price’s in terms of doubt, and for G. E. Moore’s in terms of the parts not seen. This does not by any means exhaust the many attempts to draw the

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distinction,¹ but I think it will be sufficiently clear that the kinds of objections that I raise can, if they work at all, be more widely applied.

The general idea behind the distinction is to distinguish seeing houses, cats and mountains, on the one hand, from seeing red triangular shapes and white circular patches, on the other. What is at issue is whether there is an important distinction here, and, if there is, what its importance is. It is not, of course, at issue that statements like 'I see a red, round patch' and 'I see a ship' are both sometimes true.

2. D. M. Armstrong draws the distinction in terms of inference or suggestion, taking as his starting point Berkeley's (in)famous claim in the first dialogue of *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* that 'when I hear a coach drive along the streets, immediately I perceive only the sound, but from experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach'.²

This is a puzzling claim. Berkeley purports to be talking about hearing the coach, hearing the sound, and about the relation between the two; but what he says is plausible only if construed as being about *believing* (or *knowing*) that one is hearing a sound and hearing a coach. For example, 'the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach' is irrelevant to whether I hear a coach. There is such a thing as hearing a coach for the *first* time, and so, one may hear a coach in the absence of the past experience Berkeley refers to. Past experience is only relevant to the quite separate question of whether I believe or know that the sound is that of a coach, and hence to whether I hear *that* there is a coach outside.

This confusion in Berkeley over whether we are considering the perception of things, or beliefs about perception, or perception-that seems to me to carry over into Armstrong's remarks elucidating Berkeley. For instance, Armstrong argues that

we can be said to have heard the coach only because we have heard the sound. We may not have paid much attention to the sound, we may have been much more *interested* in the coach than in the sound, but we must have heard the sound in order to hear the coach. But the reverse implication does not hold. Somebody who heard a noise, which was in fact made by a coach, but who was unfamiliar with the

¹ E.g., A. White in *G. E. Moore*, ch. 8, distinguishes six methods to be found in Moore's writings alone.

² *The Works of George Berkeley*, ed. Luce and Jessop, vol. 2, p. 204.

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noise that coaches make, could not say that he heard a coach. Or at any rate he could not say that he knew he was hearing a coach.³

But the reverse implication *does* hold. If I hear 'a noise, which was in fact made by a coach', then *ipso facto* I hear the coach – whether or not I am in a position to *say* that I do, or *know* that I do. It seems that both Berkeley and Armstrong are confusing its being true that I hear a coach with my believing or being in a position to say that I hear a coach.

The confusion between perception and belief about perception underlies the common doctrine that the distinction between mediate and immediate perception is that the latter but not the former involves no inference. Consider, for example, Armstrong's account: 'Immediate perception, then, is perception which involves no element of inference, while mediate perception does involve such an inference';⁴ and, later: 'Immediate perception, then, is perception which involves no element of suggestion. We can say if we like that it involves no element of inference, but we must remember the latitudinarian sense of the word 'inference' that is being employed.'⁵

But inference is a notion definable in terms of belief: to infer is at least to believe as a result of . . . (The interesting problems associated with spelling this out are not relevant here.⁶) So to claim that mediate perception, by contradistinction to immediate perception, involves inference is to claim that mediate perception involves certain beliefs that immediate perception does not; and this is false. Hearing the coach does not require any beliefs that hearing the sound does not. There are, so to speak, no additional beliefs which must be 'added on' to hearing the sound to get hearing the coach – if the sound is the sound of a coach, then hearing the sound is hearing the coach regardless of what one believes about whether the sound is that of a coach.

A similar point applies against the formulation in terms of suggestion. Suggestion, in the sense at issue, involves at least putative belief, but one may hear the coach without having any idea that it is a coach that one is hearing; and if one is hearing the sound of a coach, then one is hearing the coach even if the sound in no way suggests a coach to one.

In order to make reasonable sense of the claim that mediate percep-

³ *Perception and the Physical World*, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ But see M. Deutscher, 'A Causal Account of Inferring' in *Contemporary Philosophy in Australia*.

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tion involves inference (or suggestion) in a significant way that immediate perception does not, we must modify the claim to something like: *believing* that one is mediately perceiving involves inference while *believing* that one is immediately perceiving does not involve inference; or in terms of the objects of perception rather than the perceiving, *X* is an immediate object of perception if and only if one may *believe* that one perceives *X* without carrying out any kind of inference. In terms of this modification, the general idea will be that the sound counts as an immediate object of perception because one does not need to infer in order to believe that one is hearing a sound of a certain kind; while the coach is a mediate object because one does need to infer – from, for example, previously established generalizations about the kind of sound coaches make – in order to believe that one is hearing a coach.

3. There is an enormous amount that could be said here about inference and its connexion with perception but – as these issues do not bear on what follows – I will restrict myself to advancing two objections which can, I believe, be seen to be decisive without our entering into a detailed discussion of inference.

Let us switch from hearing to our primary concern, vision, and put the two objections by reference to a case of seeing a white cat. The idea behind the mediate–immediate distinction is that a certain coloured shape – white, ‘cat-shaped’, and with fuzzy edges – will be the immediate object of (visual) perception in such a case, and that the cat will be the mediate object of perception.

The first objection (to the account of the distinction given three paragraphs back) arises from the role of the mediate–immediate distinction in arriving at an overall account of perceiving. It is supposed to be a *first* step. Hence, the distinction must be drawn in a way which does not presuppose the answer to later questions. Now consider our white cat seen in pink light. What is the immediate object of perception in this case – a white shape (which looks pink), or a pink shape? The choice between these two answers is notoriously a crucial one, and drawing the distinction in terms of inference pre-empts the choice by forcing the answer most philosophers now reject – namely, a pink shape. For in order to know that one is seeing a white shape which looks pink in the circumstances, one must make reference to facts like (i) that cats are very rarely pink, and (ii) that white objects commonly look pink in this kind of lighting. Hence, precisely the reason – be it good or bad in itself – for saying that believing one is seeing a cat

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involves inference, namely, the reference to past experience, applies to the belief that one is seeing a white shape; so, *if* the first involves inference, so does the second. Likewise, the familiar point that further investigation might, in a perfectly straight-forward way, force one to abandon one's belief that one is seeing a cat (in favour, for example, of the belief that one is seeing a cleverly-made dummy) applies equally to the belief that one is seeing a white shape which looks pink. We are all familiar with the kind of cases where we would abandon the latter kind of belief in favour, for example, of the belief that what we were seeing really was pink. Sometimes a thing thought to be looking other than it is, is found to be, in fact, looking as it is.

As it happens, I believe that the immediate object of perception in the case of the white cat looking pink is a pink shape. But it is clear that this view must be argued for, as it will be, and not presumed by the very method of drawing the mediate–immediate distinction that is adopted.

The second objection arises from the fact that we are seeking to draw a distinction among objects (things, entities): things like white shapes and sounds being alleged to be in the class of the immediate objects of perception, and things like cats and coaches being alleged to be in the class of the mediate objects of perception. The inference test is disastrously equivocal when applied to objects, as the following argument shows.

Suppose I am looking at the white cat in normal lighting, so that it is not at issue that I am seeing a white shape and that I am seeing a cat; and let us use, following G. E. Moore, 'belongs to' for the relation between the white shape and the cat, whatever that relation turns out to be (perhaps it is identity, or the part-whole relation, or causal – this question can be left to one side here). Now the white shape seen will be *one and the same* as the white shape belonging to the cat. But, on the inference test, the white shape belonging to the cat must be counted as a mediate object of perception if the cat is. *If* inference is involved in believing that one sees a white cat, it must also be involved in believing that one sees a white shape belonging to a white cat; for the latter belief is stronger than the former. Hence, the inference test has the unacceptable consequence that one and the same thing – equally describable as a white shape and as a white shape belonging to a white cat – both is and is not an immediate object of perception.

Clearly, this kind of difficulty will arise for any putative immediate object of perception: the sound is the sound of a coach, and if believing that I hear a coach involves inference, so does believing that I hear the