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0521772273 - Realism and Appearances: An Essay in Ontology

John W. Yolton

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REALISM AND APPEARANCES

An essay in ontology

This book addresses one of the fundamental topics in philosophy: the relation between appearance and reality. John W. Yolton draws on a rich combination of historical and contemporary material, ranging from the early modern period to present-day debates, to examine this central philosophical preoccupation, which he presents in terms of distinctions between phenomena and causes, causes and meaning, and persons and man. He explores in detail how Locke, Berkeley and Hume talk of appearances and their relation to reality, and offers illuminating connections and comparisons with the work of contemporary philosophers such as Paul Churchland and John McDowell. He concludes by offering his own proposal for a “realism of appearance,” which incorporates elements of both Humean and Kantian thinking. His important study will be of interest to a wide range of readers in the history of philosophy, the history of ideas, and contemporary philosophy of mind, epistemology and metaphysics.

JOHN W. YOLTON is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Philosophy, Rutgers University. He is the author of many publications on John Locke and on the history of philosophy more generally, most recently *Perception and Reality: A History from Descartes to Kant* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

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For Jean

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We shall have hereafter to enquire into the nature of appearance, but for the present we may keep a fast hold on this, the appearances exist. This is absolutely certain, and to deny it is nonsense. And what exists must belong to reality.

F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, pp. 131–2

'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence.

Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 206

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Preface

In a series of books from 1983 to 1996, I have examined various themes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical writings. In *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (University of Minnesota Press and Blackwell, 1984), the themes primarily related to perception and our knowledge of external objects. The pervasive notion of “presence to the mind,” with its accompanying principle of “no thing can be or act where it is not,” raised puzzles about how the mental can relate to the physical. The implication often was that there can be no cognition at a distance. The consequences of these notions and principles seemed to be that we cannot know objects directly or in themselves. Those who grappled with these consequences, both well-known and lesser-known writers, struggled to find a way of breaking out of what some later commentators described as the “veil of ideas.” *Perceptual Acquaintance* explored various interpretations of the nature of ideas and of the relation, causal or epistemic, between the perceiver and the world.

Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain (University of Minnesota Press and Blackwell, 1983) examined Locke’s fascinating suggestion that God could have made thought a property of organized matter, presumably the brain, instead of making it a property of immaterial substance. The possibility that matter could be active, that it could be the substance or subject of both extension and thought, threatened many accepted views about the immateriality of the soul, to say nothing of traditional morality. That possibility also reinforced the newly emerging concept of matter, matter as active force and power instead of the older passive corpuscular structure waiting to be activated by God or other spirits. This newer concept had implications for perception theory, the nature of the objects we know, and the relation between ideas and objects.

There were three theories about this relation: occasionalism, pre-established harmony and physical influence. I gave a detailed account of

the presence of these theories in eighteenth-century thought in France in my *Locke and French Materialism* (Clarendon Press, 1991). The reactions to Locke's suggestion and to his stress upon sensations as one of the sources of ideas and knowledge included attacks by many defenders of traditional doctrines, as well as adoptions by some of the French *philosophes*. While any materialism resulting from thinking matter in Locke's formulation, and as found in eighteenth-century Britain, had some significant differences from the materialism of Diderot, Holbach and others in France, the way in which we as perceivers acquire information about the environment of physical objects was a common theme in Britain and France, sparked by the suggestion of thinking matter.

I traced most of these theories and issues in a more systematic and developmental fashion in *Perception and Reality: A History from Descartes to Kant* (Cornell University Press, 1996). The central focus of that study was on ideas, representations and realism, and the ways in which these three terms might go together. I suggested that, in the writings of the main figures (Descartes, Arnauld, Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant), we can follow a gradual emergence of a clear translation or transformation of the old ontological language of presence to the mind into an epistemic presence. Arnauld spearheaded this transformation, but bits and pieces of it are found in Locke's coexisting qualities, and Berkeley's and Hume's talk of ideas as the very things themselves. Kant gives us a complex, detailed articulation of what we might call an epistemic realism.

Kant's combination of transcendental idealism and empirical realism recognizes the dual role played by the perceiver and objects in the production of perceived appearances (representations, ideas). The "objects" in this process are not the objects we know, the known objects that result from the mind's interaction with stimuli from the precognitive environment. Those "objects" work on us by means of "affection," a technical term Kant employed to suggest how the cognitive process begins. Known objects inhabit the world of appearances.

In this new study, I address the question: "Can we have a realism of appearances?" I limit my examination to Locke, Berkeley and Hume (with some brief reference to Kant's notion of agent causality). I begin with a look at the tendency found in some recent writings to deny or ignore the appearances. A few other recent writers are discussed who raise again the topic of the relation between mentality and physicality. In discussing a few current writings on philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology, I do so from the point of view of what I know about sev-

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enteenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy: an historian of philosophy looking at some contemporary writings. Doing so helps me to illuminate and perhaps make more relevant the views and worries of earlier philosophers. There are some similarities and some significant differences (differences which are important for an appreciation of the nature of ideas as appearances in Locke, Berkeley and Hume) between those periods and some of the contemporary issues in our time. The rejection, downgrading or ignoring of the appearances by some contemporary writers, their easy application of phenomenological, psychological and cognitive terms to the brain and neural events, hold a lesson for us. We should admire the efforts made by Descartes, Arnauld, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant to find ways to explain the relation between physical and cognitive events, to face the difficult task of formulating a concept of object based on experience, and to do so without succumbing to either subjective idealism or reductive materialism.

Except for a few paragraphs in chapter 4, which are taken from my *Locke Dictionary*, none of this material has been published before. An earlier version of chapter 2 was presented to a seminar in the Center for Filosofi at Odense University in Denmark. I would like to thank my hosts there, Professor David Favrhøldt and Dr. Jørn Schøsler, for providing me a forum for some of my ideas and for making my visit to Odense with my wife so enjoyable and intellectually stimulating.

I have dedicated this book to my wife, my partner in scholarship, my in-house editor and skilled proof-reader. Her efforts over the years have consistently improved my prose, catching obscure and difficult sentences and passages in need of clarification. Her bibliographical skills are apparent in all my books.

Piscataway, New Jersey