

PROF. AYER'S CONCEPTION OF SENSE-DATA

Prof. Ayer is more definite and certain in his pronouncements and professions of his theories regarding the nature of sense-data and their relation to physical objects than Prof. Moore. Whereas Prof. Moore oscillates between two extreme positions whether sense-data do or do not form part of physical objects; or whether they can or cannot exist without their being perceived by a mind, Prof. Ayer is quite definite and emphatic in that physical objects *can* be completely reduced to sense-data and that sense-data *cannot* exist without their being perceived by a perceiving mind. We can well gather Moore's oscillating mind from the remarks that he made in his contribution to *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* in reply to his critics: "Although I am still inclined to think that no after-image (and therefore, also no sense-datum) can possibly exist except while it is being directly apprehended—and, more than this, none that I directly apprehend can possibly exist except while I am directly apprehending it, I cannot see why there should be a contradiction in supposing the opposite. I cannot see where the contradiction lies"¹.

Prof. Ayer takes up the thread here and takes upon himself the task of solving the problem posed by Moore. Whereas Moore does not see the contradiction where it lies, Ayer locates it.

The most characteristic difference between Moore and Ayer is that whereas for Moore the problems enumerated above are matters of fact, for Ayer they are matters of convenient linguistic terminology. The reason why these problems are not matters of fact is that they cannot be put to an empirical test. To say that we directly perceive our physical hand or a part of it, or that a particular sense-datum can continue to exist even if we cease to perceive it are claims which can neither be substantiated nor refuted by resort to experience. Similarly, the problem whether sense-data can appear to have qualities that they do not really have, can also not be solved by any device or empirical verification. These propositions, if they are at all true, are true only analytically, i.e. their truth depends on the meanings that are given to 'being part of the physical object', 'being directly seen' etc. How Ayer solves these problems will be taken one by one.

Whether we perceive Physical Objects or sense-data :

We have "somewhat" discussed this problem in our treatment of "Is there a problem about Sense-data" and made references to the view of Ayer in this connection. There, we noted that he recommended the use of the term "sense-datum" instead of physical objects as a matter of linguistic convention and not because of its stronger claims to facts of experience. Experience is not going to decide the issue either in favour of the one or the other. Nor it is going to be decided by the actual usage of the various expressions involved. Once² Ayer held the view that such problems can be solved by reflecting on the standard usages of the different expressions but now³ he holds the view that it cannot be so solved because of there being no established usages of such terms as 'physical objects' and 'sense-data'. How is the problem to be solved then ? Ayer's view is that the problem cannot be solved so long as it is assumed that the truth or falsehood of the proposition is already there to be discovered. The problem is "not as that of assessing the validity of a proposition on the evidence already available but rather as that of 'manufacturing' the evidence".⁴ Alternatively, in order to remove such doubts from our minds whether we perceive physical objects or sense-data, what we must think about is 'not the actual truth or falsehood of the propositions in question (for this is not determinable) but the advisability of making them true or false'.⁵ Thus, when Moore holds that some visual sense-data, are identical with parts of the surfaces of physical objects while others are not, he is not making two incompatible assertions either logically or empirically, but rather 'hesitating over the choice of alternative conventions'.⁶ There being no fixed usages of words with regard to sense-data, their usage will have to be prescribed and determined by us.

Prof. Moore has a different opinion about the meaning of sense-data. According to him, though the meaning of a sense-datum cannot be settled by the method of empirical verification, it can be settled by the analysis of standard usage. He says that 'such a question whether the surfaces of physical objects are directly seen can be reformulated in a way which does not bring in any of the technical expressions as 'sense-datum', 'directly see' or 'directly apprehend' but does bring those expressions which do have a standard usage in ordinary life. The expressions I mean

are those which consist in saying such words as "This is a penny" or "That is a penny", together with some standard gesture which seems to explain what object we are referring to by the words "this" and "that"; and if we could only discover the right analysis of what is meant by such expressions, my question would be answered⁷. Moore justifies this analysis on the basis of Russell's Theory of Descriptions as he says that when expressions like 'this is a penny' are used in this way, there is one and only one object to which the demonstrative refers, 'an object which it is tempting to suppose to be identical with *the* part, which (the percipient) is seeing of the physical object's surface but with regard to which on the other hand, there are strong reasons for supposing that it cannot be identical with *the* part which he is seeing, of the physical object's surface.⁸ It is in this way that Moore says that the meaning of a sense-datum can be understood by providing explicit definition of it together with a demonstrative gesture.

Ayer's objection to the above analysis given by Moore is that in his analysis of the meaning of a sense-datum as 'this is a penny' together with a gesture, the demonstrative 'this' does not refer to any object as Moore describes. In a case where I am looking at a penny, and say with an appropriate gesture, "this is a penny", the word "this", does not stand for a sense-datum which can be identified with *the* part of the penny's surface, rather it stands for the object "penny" itself. The word "this" would have stood for the sense-datum if I would have said 'this is the surface of the penny' or 'this is part of the surface of a penny' and not 'this is a penny'. But here Prof. Ayer is mistaken in saying that for Prof. Moore, the word 'this' in 'this is a penny' stands for a sense-datum as we have made clear in giving his analysis of sense-datum. Even for him, the word 'this' stands for an object⁹; it is short for a description of the type "the object of which *this* is part". It stands for a sense-datum when the word 'this' is no longer short for a description but only serves the purpose of demonstration.

Elucidating further his point, Prof. Ayer says that even in cases where I mistake some other object for a penny and say 'this is a penny' the word 'this' does not refer to a sense-datum but denotes whatever *object* it is that I am mistaking for a penny. And in extreme cases where I undergo a complete hallucination and say 'this is a penny', the demonstrative 'this' does not stand for any

object at all. The upshot of all this is that a sense-datum cannot be explained in terms of its explicit definitions together with a demonstrative gesture for it may contain expressions or words which do not stand for anything at all. Ayer's point is that 'it is a mistake to identify the meaning even of a demonstrative with its denotation'. There may be demonstratives which do not denote anything at all. Moore's conception of sense-data is the result of his faulty logic, i.e. that of identifying the meaning of a demonstrative with its denotation. The full meaning of a sense-datum cannot be understood in this way; it can be understood only in the way we decide to use it.

In our day-to-day talks, we do not use the word 'see' in one invariable way. Sometimes, the word 'see', is used in a way where what is 'seen' does actually exist and at other times we use the word 'see' where what is 'seen' does not in fact exist but is only imagined to exist. Let us take the case of Macbeth's perception of the dagger. The situation can be described either by saying that Macbeth *saw* a dagger which did not exist or by saying that he imagined he saw a dagger, but did not really see it. If we say that he saw the dagger, then we are using the word 'see' in a way that from 'X is seen', it does not follow that 'X exists'. If on the other hand, we use the word 'see' in a way that 'X is seen' does entail 'X exists', we must not say that Macbeth saw the dagger, but that he only imagined that he saw it. Both the uses are legitimate from the common sense point of view. But the question is which of the two we are to adopt in direct apprehension. The point is : if we can be said to directly apprehend X, does it or does it not entail the proposition 'X exists' ?

Prof. Moore does not explicitly state his intention of the use of the word 'direct apprehension'. But one thing is clear that he thinks it logically inappropriate to say that a thing is being directly apprehended but that it does not exist. Thus, in the case of Macbeth's perception of the dagger, Prof. Moore would say that there existed a sense-datum which Macbeth was directly apprehending, though his sense-datum was not identical with part of the surface of a real physical dagger. In this sense, it is only a sense-datum and not a physical object, that can be directly apprehended. For, with regard to a physical object, it can always be maintained logically that it is seen or otherwise perceived in a

sense of the word 'see', from which it does not follow that it exists. We may be undergoing an illusion or hallucination. Thus, a physical object and not a sense-datum, cannot be directly apprehended. From which it follows that no sense-datum can possibly be identical with any physical entity.

If it is so, all attempts to treat physical entities as sense-datum as Prof. Moore has done, are bound to be a failure. This failure can be seen on three different fronts. Firstly, if one takes any physical entity as a sense-datum, one will have to use the words which stand for the various modes of direct apprehension in a way that to say that something is being directly apprehended, does not entail saying either that it has whatever characteristics it appears to have or that it exists. But, this does not meet the purpose which the philosophers who have used the term sense-datum, have commonly intended it to fulfil. For, one of the motives that led philosophers to use the terminology of sense-data, was their desire to be able to say, in such cases as that of Macbeth's imaginary dagger, that something, which existed was being seen even though it was not a real physical dagger. One of the advantages of this procedure was that it serves to clarify the meaning of statements about physical objects in terms of statements about sense-data which are of a different logical form. But this desire on the part of these philosophers cannot be said to be satisfied if the sense-data themselves are taken to be parts of physical objects which allows the apprehension of sense-data to be mistaken both qualitatively and existentially.

If we define direct apprehension in a way other than the one described above, it will have the effect of separating sense-data from physical entities. One such way to define direct apprehension is that to say of something that it is directly apprehended, will entail saying that it exists but does not have the characteristics that it appears to have. But this way of defining 'direct apprehension' would have the serious objection that it deals with qualitative illusions on a footing different from existential illusions. If a sense-datum which the observer is directly apprehending, does really exist even though the physical object, which we may imagine he is perceiving, does not exist, there is no reason why a qualitative illusion may not be dealt with in a similar way. We have as good a reason for saying that something i.e. a sense-datum which one is

directly apprehending is really yellow, even though the object which has it is white, as we have for saying, in the case of Macbeth's hallucinatory perception of the dagger, that something i.e. a sense-datum, which he was directly apprehending, did really exist even though the object to which it belonged, did not exist.

Thus, the only course open to us if we are serious about our use of the terminology of sense-data and if it is to serve some useful purpose—is to exclude the possibility of their being either qualitatively or existentially delusive. That is to say that 'X is directly apprehended' would entail—'X exists, and X has whatever characteristics it appears to have'. This will have the effect of completely separating the sense-data from physical objects. Again, in order to minimise the danger of confusing sense-data with physical entities, the converse of it should also be taken to be true. That is, 'X exists' would entail 'X is directly apprehended'. In other words, the existence of X a sense-datum is made as logically dependent upon its being directly apprehended and the converse of it is also true. So that when Berkeley said *esse est percipi*, it is a proposition not to be proved on the basis of empirical facts, but to be accepted on a well-established convention of our use of the word 'sense-datum'. It is simply a matter of deciding that the expression 'X exists' where X is a sense-datum, is to be understood both to be entailed by and to entail 'X is directly apprehended'.

Can Sense-Data have Characteristics that they do not appear to have ?

In the previous section we have seen that we have so used the word 'sense-datum', that it cannot *appear* to have characteristics that it does not really have. Let us see if the converse of it is also true, that is, a sense-datum cannot *have* characteristics that it does not appear to have. The very fact that we have resolved to interpret 'X exists' where X is a sense-datum, to mean 'X is directly apprehended', excludes the possibility for a sense-field to have constituents which are not apprehended at all. As against this view, there are philosophers who maintain that sense-data may be much more differentiated than we think them to be¹⁰ or that "two sense-data may be really different when we cannot perceive any difference between them"¹¹ or that 'sense-field may really contain

a definite number of constituents of a certain kind without their being apprehended otherwise than as merely numerous'. Let us see what meaning can be attached to these statements.

Let us take the first statement i.e. 'that sense-data may be much more differentiated than we think them to be'. Ayer maintained in one of his previous works¹² that such a statement to be meaningful would involve the use of a physiological criterion to determine the real characteristics of sense-data. But if sense-data themselves are to be defined in physical or physiological terms, this will have the effect of nullifying the utility of the sense-datum terminology as a tool for the analysis of propositions about physical objects. That is why, he maintained there that in the domain of sense-data, whatever appeared and also only what appeared, should be taken as real. Thus, if the use of a microscope reveals details in an object that were not to be seen previously, it would not mean that some sense-data were more differentiated than others, but that one set of sense-data was being replaced by another and this would perfectly be a legitimate and adequate description of the empirical facts. Similarly, to say that two sense-data might be really different, when we cannot perceive any difference between them, is based on the assumption that the relation of exact resemblance was transitive in its application to sense-data, as well as in its application to physical objects and this assumption can easily be contradicted. Again, to say that a sense-field may contain a definite number of constituents although it is apprehended as merely numerous, is obviously false. In a case of a person's seeing stars, there is no doubt that a number of sense-data are apprehended without being apprehended as a definite number, the same thing cannot be said of physical objects like actual stars. While, it would be self-contradictory for physical objects to be numerous without consisting of any definite number, the same cannot be true about sense-data. The upshot of the whole thing is that a sense-datum cannot have characteristics that it does not appear to have.

Prof. Price¹³ and Mr. Chisholm¹⁴ have raised objections against the last point on the ground that it commits us to saying that 'a sense-datum can have a determinable characteristic, without having *any* of the determinate characteristics which fall under that determinable' which is like saying that an event will occur in a

given year but not in any of the particular months of which the year is composed. The objection would have been perfectly legitimate, had the epithet 'numerous' been applied to physical objects than to sense-data, but it loses much of its force when it is remembered that the epithet 'numerous' refers to sense-data. To take Price's own example of a striped tiger, it would be self-contradictory to say that the tiger has a number of 'physically dark stripes on the left-hand side of its body' without having some definite number, but it is not self-contradictory to say of the visual sense-field, corresponding to the physical-expanse of the tiger, that it contains a number of stripes without containing any definite number. The reason is that the characteristics which are to be ascribed to this sense-field are not necessarily those that the tiger really has, but only those that it appears to have, so that when stars are apprehended as numerous without being apprehended as a definite number, the reference was not to the physical characteristic of *being* numerous but to the physical characteristic of *looking* numerous. Prof. Price himself admits this when he says that the stripes on the tiger look numerous, does not entail saying that they look to be a definite number. What is really meant by saying that a sense-field contains a number of stripes, is simply that it has the Gestalt quality of being striated and the presence of this quality, though quite compatible with there being a definite number, does not entail it. In the same vein, Price remarks, that a sense-datum, say, of a flower, 'might be blue without having any definite shade of blue' or it 'might have a roundish shape, but not any definite sort of roundish shape'. If it is insisted that the very meaning of the word 'determinable' is such that it precludes the possibility for anything, whether physical objects or sense-datum, to have a determinable characteristic without having some determinate characteristic which falls under the determinable, Prof. Ayer answers that, in that case, "words like 'blue' and 'roundish' are not in this usage names of determinable characteristics, but of qualities which are simple in the sense of not being analysable into a disjunction of others, just as a word like 'striated' when applied to a sense-field, may be used as the name of a Gestalt quality, which is not analysable in terms of a numerical disjunction of stripes".¹⁵

Prof. Ayer's Comments :

There are philosophers who maintain that sense-data are a nuisance and their introduction does not serve any useful purpose. They go even to the length of saying that their use in interpreting perceptual phenomena is quite illegitimate. Thus, Prof. Ryle remarks in his *Concept of Mind* that "this whole theory (of sense-data) rests upon a logical howler, the howler, namely, of assimilating the concept of sensation to the concept of observation".¹⁶ The ground for taking this a howler is that if observing something implies having a sensation then having a sensation cannot itself be a form of observation. Otherwise, it would in its turn involve having a further sensation thus leading to an indefinite regress. His point is : what can be said about observation or perception, cannot significantly be said about sensation. 'When a person has been watching a horse-race, it is proper to ask whether he had a good or bad view of it, whether he watched it carefully or carelessly and whether he tried to see as much of it as he could.' But it is quite foolish to ask such questions about sensations any more than any one asks how the first letter in "London" is spelled.¹⁷ Sensations are 'not objects of observation' and 'having a sensation cannot itself be a species of perceiving, finding or espying'.¹⁸

Prof. Ayer, in reply to the above objection, will say that Prof. Ryle is using a physiological criterion¹⁹ to determine the characteristics of sense-data which cannot be admitted as it begs the question at issue. Moreover, the objection is based on the assumption that it is impossible to perceive anything without having the appropriate sensation. But Ryle himself subsequently does not accept the above assumption as he says that 'the primary concept of sensation is not a component of the generic concept of perception, since it is just a species of that genus'.²⁰ There is no doubt that some of our perceptions are accompanied by sensations, such as a strain in the eyes or a tingling in the ears, these sensations do not represent the objects that are seen or heard. They are not visual or auditory impressions or sense-data of which philosophers, of late, have been talking. They do not even exist. "Impressions are ghostly impulses, postulated for the ends of a para-mechanical theory".²¹

Prof. Ayer, as against the above view, maintains that firstly, the advocates of sense-data do not treat sensation as a form of observation; rather they do not believe in the existence of sensations at all. Secondly, even if they treat sensation as a form of observation, Observation is not here something which itself entails sensation. Thus they are not committed to indefinite regress. We have seen that the sense-datum philosophers have a special reason for analysing the perception of physical objects into the sensing of seeming objects, but these reasons do not apply to the sensing of seeming objects themselves. Thus, there is no question of adopting the general view that we cannot approach an object except through an intermediary. Prof. Ryle seems to have adopted this general view. When it is accepted that we *can* be aware of a sense-datum without there being a sensation, it "in effect explains the having of sensations as the *not* having any sensations."²² Here Prof. Ryle understands by "sensations" as "being sensitively affected". But what is this "being sensitively affected" ? Is it not explaining experiences in physico-physiological terms ? If it is so, how are we going to explain these physico-physiological affects ? If we explain experiences in physico-physiological terms and physico-physiological affects in empirical terms, will it not involve the fallacy of circular reasoning ? In order to avoid these difficulties, Prof. Ayer suggests that one of the two should be taken as primary and the other as simply derived. Obviously nothing can be more primary than our experiences, for after all, all our knowledge ultimately depends upon them. Thus on Prof. Ayer's view to talk of some-one's sensing a sense-datum is just another way of saying that he is sensitively affected. There is no use to introduce anything over and above sense-data at all in the form of sensations.

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NOTES

1. The Philosophy of G.E. Moore, p. 660.
2. Language, Truth and Logic, p. 57
3. Philosophical Essays, pp. 76-80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Reply to critics in the Philosophy of G. E. Moore, 2nd Ed. p. 680.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 679.
9. Moore, G. E., Visual Sense-Data in British Philosophy in the Mid.-Century, p-206.
10. Broad, C. D., Scientific Thought, p. 244.
11. Russell, B., Our Knowledge of the External World, p. 141.
12. The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp. 116-135.
13. Review of 'The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge'; Mind, N. S. 50, pp. 280-293.
14. 'The Problem of the Speckled Hen', Mind, N. S. 51, pp. 368-373.
15. Ayer, A. J., Philosophical Essays, p. 94.
16. Ryle, G., The Concept of Mind, p. 213.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
19. The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge, pp. 116-135.
20. The Concept of Mind, p. 242.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
22. *Ibid.*

