

IMMEDIACY.

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THEORIES of perception have been confronted by a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, the sight of an object appears to the beholder to occur without the intermediation of any other thing or of any other process. On the other hand, it is certain that waves of light fall on the retina of the eye and excite certain changes in the optic nerve when vision occurs, and it would seem that this impingement of light must be adverted to first as a change in the eye itself—in a word, as a “sensation.” From such sensations felt at the retina it would seem as though, at the best, there could be but a very rapid inference to that part of the physical world before one’s face as an assumed cause of their occurrence. Indeed, it is certain that our knowledge of the world has actually grown from earliest childhood in some such manner. Of course, beside the knowledge gained through the eye itself, other knowledge gained through the sensibility of the skin, through movement, through the muscular sense and through possibly other factors is added thereto. But as it is through eyesight that a view is held firmly in front of us and made, by this fact of permanence, different from other sorts of knowledge, it is to vision that attention must be chiefly given in attempting to untangle the matter.

Now, no matter how quickly we may assume sight of anything to occur it seems hard to get beyond the fact that the physical change must first of all be known as a sensation—that is, as an affection of the part of the body where it first happened; and that the perception of its cause must be later—an inference becoming quicker and quicker and more thorough each time an act of sight has occurred from birth, but which, no matter how shortened, must in some form always be there.

Yet if we accept the testimony of consciousness in the matter, nothing becomes more certain, the closer we examine it, than that no

inference, no reasoning of the most rudimentary or most abbreviated sort, occurs when we open our eyes to a view; the sight is instant, immediate. That something very like an inference did, in some factors at least, occur in childhood has nothing to do with the fact that at present every trace of it has vanished. What then does happen now when we look at an object?

To try and understand the matter, let us take an analogous instance which may throw some light on the subject. If one will recall his state of mind when absorbed in reading some intensely interesting argument or exposition, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion that the knowledge derived from the printed page entered the mind directly; there was no direct consciousness of letters or words, sentences or paragraphs. We seem to see through the print, as it were, into the meaning behind it. It is true that the direction of our attention to the argument is conditioned by the print before us in a way apparently like that in which our perception of a stereoscopic view without the aid of the appropriate optical instrument is conditioned by the disagreeable squint of the eyes to see in two directions. But just as the stereoscopic view is directly perceived, so is the argument.

Now it is certain that the argument could not be perceived without the existence of the words printed. Nor could these words have been perceived in the past when learning them as a child, without the letters of which they are made; and again one step farther back, each letter itself depends for its existence on certain peculiarities of relative shape and size. Finally, each and every one of these factors, the shapes of the letters, the letters themselves, the words, had to be known before their meanings when combined could be learned. All this is obvious enough. Yet this vast complex process is non-existent in reading. It might be said that the original inference from relative forms of the letters and thence to words has been leaped over, so that now the inference is from the original forms of the letters to the argument at once. Similarly, it might be argued that we jump from a sensation on the retina at once to the perception of the sight which it connotes. Undoubtedly this argument simplifies matters; it is a step in the right direction. Yet it too has still the fatal difficulty of harking back to an "original sensation" from which in some way or other we make a lightning-like inference that no one ever suspected he performed till induced to think so by a theory. Whereas, if mature consciousness declares anything, it declares that this "original sensation" as now occurring is a myth. It simply does not exist. I open my eyes and see the avenue of trees

shade into the distance. But this view is direct, instant. The waves of light are the accompaniment of no sensation in the eyeball at all. They accompany immediately and directly the sight of the avenue, just as the page of the book may (if the book is interesting enough) excite directly the argument. It is not that an "original sensation" now occurring is the premise of a consequent, developed perception; rather is it that what was the "original sensation" (either in childhood or among far distant, lower forms of life in the past) is gone. Where it once was is now a perception. How can this be?

To understand this, let us ask first of all what we really mean by a sensation. For if by sensation we mean "feeling"—like pleasure or pain (not *a* pleasure or *a* pain) or like emotion—then a perception could not develop from such sensation, for feeling (an affection of the subject) cannot become knowledge (an intuition of the object). It is true enough that in common speech the word sensation often covers feeling as well as knowledge, while it is hard to say with some writers whether the possibility of this distinction is at all admitted. The fact is that the sensation itself is simply knowledge, at the very lowest, of some physical affection of some part of the body—it is knowledge, whether it be knowledge possessed by a jelly-fish or by a human being. Always the sensation means something either to jelly-fish or human being,—even if the meaning be merely that something is happening. There is hardly a stronger proof of this fact than the existence of the unnatural, i. e., unusual, feeling of pleasure or pain which hypnotism can excite on the occasion of a physical stimulus which ordinarily would be accompanied by feeling of a different sort. As soon as there is a little further development of mind above that of primitive organisms, a sensation means that something is happening to the subject at the surface of the body and is viewed by him in a certain relation to the rest of the body and to its physical needs.

But this physical agitation of a part of the surface of the body, though primitively it has this primary meaning of reference merely to that fact itself or to the physical needs of the body, is not restricted to such meaning. Other meanings to the subject may arise as circumstances change and as the beholding mind evolves. Now it is to the later meanings in the course of the development of mind that we have come to advert and especially is this so in the case of sight.

Thus the argument comes to this: We see immediately because, while a certain physical motion in the retina and optic nerve meant primitively to the subject that the eye was somehow affected, it also

could just as truly mean, and in the end came to mean, that something is occurring in the world outside of the body. The first meaning was prior in time, in the development of the race and of the individual, but the latter meaning having been learned, can just as well be attended to; and, in the case of sight, so constant have been the repetitions of seeing and so constantly has it been practical wisdom for the organism to attend to the later meaning that we have almost lost the power to know what has occurred within our organism following the impact of light on the eye, as meaning psychically (as well as being physically) an affection of the eyeball—so constantly have we come to know it as meaning, what it just as truly does mean, a manifold of things in the physical world. To mind, at first, the psychological accompaniment of the light impact was a sensation, now to a mature human mind it is something very different though something just as true. We see a hill directly and immediately because a hill is the direct and immediate meaning we give to the organic result of the impingement of the light waves in certain circumstances. And there is no sensation in mature life at all, because we utterly ignore the other possible and true meaning of the organic result of this same light impact.

To make the matter clearer, let us examine it from another standpoint. We often hear of a picture painted by the rays of light on the retina. Such a picture may appear on another's eye when seen with an ophthalmoscope, and such a picture may be seen in my eyes by another. But to the possessor of the eyes himself, no such picture exists subjectively at all. Primitively sight may have been an exquisitely veiled touch such as that experienced when one's eyes are oversensitive on passing from a darker to a lighter room. But gradually the veiled touches on this primitive fundus must have been discriminated in the course of the life of the race and far quicker in the course of the life of a higher organism after birth. But these eye-touches to the lower animal as to the child had but the meaning that that part of his body was somehow affected from without. This was the first perception, the first inference from the sensation. But when this inference was established, the perception, such as it was, became immediate even though the sensation may have persisted beside it, just as the perception of a rough surface is immediate when felt with a stick, or just as the perception of the point of a pin is immediate though the sensation is of the prick. But the sensational meaning gradually became completely ignored to the benefit of the perceptual one. This change in the meaning of the same physical fact in the case of eyesight involved the complete disappearance of

the sensation under normal conditions, probably through natural selection, because a sensation in the eye necessarily tends to evoke personal pleasure or pain, and this would be disturbing to the attention which safety requires to be given to outer objects. This involves that when the retina is electrically irritated and what we call a flash of light happens, there is no pleasure or pain felt in the eyeball. In fact the flash is a perception, though a primitive one; it is not the "original sensation" analogous to that given, though not exclusively given, by touch. This is, it seems, in the case of sight, no longer evocable.

Yet it is possible to revive something near the "original sensation," an older meaning of the physical result of the light impact. In proof of this I may recall a personal experience. My first knowledge of Berkeley was obtained when a boy through Huxley's little essay, and it seemed to me that I entered a new world. As I read the outline of the theory of vision and concluded that I really saw nothing of the outer world directly but only knew it through the intervention of visual signs, on a sudden the whole world of eyesight seemed to lift away from the room I was in, contract to my eyes and become a little painted picture on the skin of my face. Never shall I forget the startlingness of the experience which, however, my interest rendered awesome and convincing but not terrifying. A step further would have resolved this picture into shades and colors, and I dare say had I been reading the original essay of Berkeley and taken it as seriously as I did Huxley's version, this might have occurred also. As it was, I apparently went back as far as one born blind and made afterwards to see.

It may be said that, granting all the foregoing, still this means only that what we see is seen immediately, but not that it is the outer world which thus really is immediately seen; what we get directly (it may be said) is simply a meaning of the physical change in our own organism, which we "project" into space. Really, the objection may proceed, we are interpreting a certain molecular dance in our eyes and optic nerve, perhaps in the optic thalami, but not the world outside of the body directly.

In answer to this it may be replied that a molecular dance (if for brevity's sake we may use this expression) is no more a sensation than it is a perception. It is simply a bare physical fact without any meaning merely as such and apart from the attention of the subject. But its meaning to the subject may be a perception (knowledge of a state in the physical world) just as well as a sensation (knowledge of a state in one's own body). Because the physical changes are in

the body their meaning is not necessarily any more of their own character than the meaning of a printed word is of the ink with which it is printed. To talk of "projecting" into space the meaning of a physical change in the eyeball is nonsense based on a confusion of the mental and physical. To the mind there is no such thing as distance because distance is a physical category. The body is unutterable spaces from Sirius but the mind is just as near as to the chair in one's room. I can "project" a ball into space by the movement of the arm, but to "project" a perception, a meaning, is much like bounding geographically the theorem of the square on the hypotenuse. It is confusing the perception as meaning, as an act of mind, with the facts perceived (or meant) as actually existing and interrelated in space, of which facts, of course, the physical body is one. Meaning may be *of* here or there, but *is* neither here nor there, neither in nor out of the body. Moreover, meaning is necessarily instant, immediate, otherwise it were still inference, not meaning. We might say that the mind gathers directly the meaning of the outer world, which it views through sight, from the physical changes in its organism, just as it gathers the meaning of an interesting argument directly from the words of the printed page. The bare physical facts of the world of matter and energy have in themselves and apart from our interpretation, no particular meaning at all, not even that of their own occurrence or of their own configuration; thus in interpreting them we may take directly from them the meaning to our organism of their physical relations *inter se* (a sensation), or we may take directly from them, when we can do so, the meaning of other physical facts (as in the case of eyesight) or of conceptions (in the case of the printed page).