

Section 12: The sceptical philosophy

Part 1

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It seems clear that we humans are naturally, instinctively inclined to trust our senses, and that without any reasoning—indeed, almost before the use of reason—we take it that there is an external universe that doesn't depend on our perceiving it and would have existed if there had never been any perceiving creatures or if we had all been annihilated. Even the animals are governed by a similar opinion, and maintain this belief in external objects in all their thoughts, plans and actions.

It also seems clear that when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature they always suppose that the very images that their senses present to them are the external objects that they perceive; it never crosses their minds that sensory images are merely representations of external objects. This very table that we see as white and feel as hard is believed to exist independently of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. Our presence doesn't bring it into existence, and our absence doesn't annihilate it. It stays in existence (we think), complete and unchanging, independent of any facts about intelligent beings who perceive it or think about it.

But the slightest philosophy is enough to destroy this basic belief that all men have. For philosophy teaches us that images (or perceptions) are the only things that can ever be present to the mind, and that the senses serve only to bring these images before the mind and cannot put our minds into any immediate relation with external objects.

The table that we see seems to shrink as we move away from it; but the real table that exists independently of us doesn't alter; so what was present to the mind wasn't the real table but only an image of it. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no-one who thinks about it has ever doubted that when we say 'this house' and 'that tree' the things we are referring to are nothing but

perceptions in the mind—fleeting copies or representations of other things that are independent of us and don't change.

To that extent, then, reason compels us to contradict or depart from the basic instincts of nature, and to adopt a new set of views about the evidence of our senses. These views amount to a philosophical system according to which

- (1) we perceive only images, not external objects, but
- (2) there are external objects, and images represent them.

But when philosophy tries to justify this new system, and put to rest the carping objections of the sceptics, it finds itself in an awkward position regarding the claim (2) that there are external objects that our images represent. Philosophy can no longer rely on the idea that natural instincts are infallible and irresistible, for those instincts led us to a quite different system that is admitted to be fallible and even wrong. And to justify the external-object part of this purported philosophical system by a chain of clear and convincing argument—or even by any appearance of argument—is more than anyone can do.

By what argument can it be proved that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects that are perfectly distinct from them and yet similar to them (if that were possible), rather than arising from the energy of the mind itself, or from the activities of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us? It is admitted that many of these perceptions—e.g. in dreams, madness, and other diseases—don't in fact arise from anything external, so how could we prove that others do arise from something external? In any case, we are utterly unable to explain how a body could so act on a mind as to convey an image of itself to a mental substance whose nature is supposed to be so different from—even contrary to—its own nature.

Are the perceptions of the senses produced by external objects that resemble them? This is a question of fact. Where shall we look for an answer to it? To experience, surely, as we do with all other questions of that kind. But here experience is and must be entirely silent. The mind never has anything present to it except the perceptions, and can't possibly experience their connection with objects. The belief in such a connection, therefore, has no foundation in reasoning because the reasoning would have to start from something known through experience.

We might try to prove that our senses are truthful by appealing to the truthfulness of God, but that would be a strange direction for the argument to take, for two reasons.

- (1) If the fallibility of our senses implied that God is untruthful, then our senses would never mislead us; because it isn't possible that God should ever deceive.
- (2) Anyway, once the external world has been called in question we are left with no arguments to prove that God exists or to show what his attributes are.

The deeper and more philosophical sceptics, trying to cast doubt on all subjects of human knowledge and enquiry, will always triumph when it comes to the question of external bodies. 'Do you follow your natural instincts and inclinations', they may say, 'when you affirm the truthfulness of your senses? But those instincts lead you to believe that the perception or image that you experience is itself the external object. Do you reject that view, in order to accept the more reasonable opinion that perceptions are only representations of something external? In that case you are departing from your natural inclinations and more obvious opinions; and yet you still can't satisfy your reason, which can never find any convincing argument from experience to prove that your perceptions are connected with external objects.'

Another sceptical line of thought—somewhat like that one—has deep philosophical roots, and might be worth attending to if there were any point in digging that far down in order to discover arguments that can be of so little serious use. All modern enquirers agree that all the sensible qualities of objects—such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, etc.—are merely secondary; they don't exist in the objects themselves (it is believed), and are perceptions of the mind with no external pattern or model that they represent. If this is granted regarding secondary qualities, it also holds for the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity, which are no more entitled to be called 'primary' than the others are. The idea of extension comes purely from the senses of sight and touch; and if all the qualities that are perceived by the senses are in the mind rather than in the object, that must hold also for the idea of extension, which wholly depends on sensible ideas, i.e. on the ideas of secondary qualities. To see that something is extended, you have to see colours; to feel that it is extended, you have to feel hardness or softness. The only escape from this conclusion is to assert that we get the ideas of those 'primary' qualities through abstraction; but the doctrine of abstraction turns out under careful scrutiny to be

unintelligible, and even absurd. An extension that is neither tangible nor visible can't possibly be conceived; and a tangible or visible extension that is neither hard nor soft, black nor white, is equally beyond the reach of human conception. Let anyone try to conceive a triangle in general, which has no particular length or proportion of sides, and he will soon see the absurdity of all the scholastic notions concerning abstraction and general ideas.

Thus the first philosophical objection to the belief in external objects is this: If the belief is based on natural instinct it is contrary to reason; and if it is attributed to reason it is contrary to natural instinct, and anyway isn't supported by any rational evidence that would convince an impartial person who thought about it. The second objection goes further and represents this belief as contrary to reason—at least if reason says that all sensible qualities are in the mind and not in the object. Deprive matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, and you in a way annihilate it and leave only a certain mysterious something as the cause of our perceptions, a notion so imperfect that no sceptic will think it worthwhile to argue against it.