

## CHAPTER SIX



# Immediate Experience

We have now examined the first main part of what many, beginning with Descartes, have regarded as the basis or *foundation* for justification and knowledge, namely a priori insight and the beliefs that it allegedly justifies. In this chapter, we turn to what has been regarded as the second main foundational component: immediate experience and the justification that allegedly results from it. Though we will have to discuss the general idea of immediate experience, our main focus will be on the particular variety of immediate experience allegedly involved in sense perception—for it is here, according to most philosophers in the general Cartesian tradition, that the main basis for knowledge of the material world “external” to mind is to be found.

### The Concept of Immediacy

What then is *immediate* experience? What exactly is the significance of describing it as “immediate” (or, alternatively, as “direct”)? The contrast, as the term itself suggests, is with things that although still experienced in some sense, are experienced via the *mediation* of something else, something that is itself experienced more directly or immediately. But just what sort of mediation is at issue here?

Perhaps the clearest examples of experience that is less than fully immediate are those involving explicit *inference*. Thus, for example, suppose that upon hearing a certain distinctive thumping or vibrating noise, I am puzzled

(and perhaps slightly alarmed) for just a moment, and then realize (because this is the overwhelmingly best explanation for the sound) that my dog Willy is scratching himself, as he often does, and bumping against the dining room table as he does it. Here it would be quite natural to say that I *hear*, and thus *experience*, my dog scratching and bumping into the table. But it also seems reasonable to say that my experience of the scratching and bumping is *mediated* by (a) an experience or awareness of the sound this activity produces that is more direct and (b) an inference from the awareness of this sound to the thought that the dog is behaving in the way described.

Why exactly might we be tempted to say this? In the first place, my awareness of Willy's activity is obviously *caused* by my awareness of the sound, which is thus in a sense prior. And, second, the *reason* or *justification* both (i) for the belief that I come to have in this case that Willy is indeed scratching and bumping, and (ii) for the belief (whether held by me or by an external observer) that I do *hear* Willy behaving in this way (think carefully about the difference between these two beliefs) clearly depends on my having an awareness of the sound.<sup>1</sup> We need not worry for the moment about whether my inference is really justified and, if so, how. All that matters for the moment is that it takes place and that my experience of Willy's activity consequently depends on my prior experience of the noise in both of these ways.<sup>2</sup>

Consider now a series of modified examples. As I become more familiar with this particular doggy activity, my momentary hesitation becomes briefer and briefer and the inference in question becomes less and less considered and explicit. Eventually we reach a case where it is no longer clear that any explicit inference is taking place at all: one in which I just think at once, with no hesitation or uncertainty at all, that Willy is again scratching and bumping the table. In this last case, I may no longer focus on the noise in any very explicit way, and it might even be questioned whether I am very explicitly aware of it at all. Intuitively, what I am primarily aware of experiencing is just the scratching and bumping activity of the dog.

But even in this case, it seems clear that my experience or awareness of the dog's activity is still causally dependent on an awareness of some sort of the sound. After all, if my ears were plugged or otherwise disabled, I would obviously no longer be aware in any sense of the dog's activity (assuming, of course, that I do not perceive it in some other way). Moreover, if someone (perhaps someone who does not know what is causing the sound) were to ask whether I heard that funny thumping and vibrating noise, the answer would plainly be "yes"; and (a trickier and less obvious point—think carefully about it) it would also seemingly be true that my awareness of the sound did not just begin at the point when the question was asked, but rather was present

earlier as an element in my total conscious experience, even though I was not focusing on it explicitly. In addition, the most crucial point, both the belief that the dog's activity is taking place and the belief that I am hearing this activity still seem to depend for their justification (assuming for the moment that they are justified at all) on my awareness of the sound, even though there is no longer an explicit inference involved—at least, this is something that many, many philosophers have taken to be obviously true.<sup>3</sup> The main reasons for such a view are, first, the continuity of this case with the earlier ones in which the justificational dependence is clearer and also, second, the alleged absence of any good alternative account of where the justification might come from.<sup>4</sup>

We now have a reasonably clear set of examples in which one thing (the noise produced by Willy's activity) is experienced *more* immediately than something else (that activity itself). But most if not all philosophers who have ever invoked the notion of immediate experience would also deny that the sound is itself immediately experienced. Sounds, after all, are still physical occurrences external to the mind: vibrations in the air. As Descartes would have been quick to point out, a sound is thus something about which the evil genius might deceive me. Hence, he might argue, what is experienced *most* immediately in this situation is not the external, physical sound, but rather something subjective and mental, about which, in his view, I could not be deceived: the aural *sensations* or apparent aural qualities that would still occur even if the evil genius were deceiving me about the physical sound or, alternatively, even if I were merely hallucinating it or experiencing it in a dream.<sup>5</sup> And here too the claim would be, first, that my experience of the physical sound, assuming that I really am experiencing one, clearly depends on or results from my experience or awareness of these subjective sensations; and, second, that my reason or justification (if any) for thinking both that such a sound has actually occurred and that I have experienced it also depends on my experience of these sensations, making that experience also prior from a justificatory standpoint.

In fact, according to the general view held by Descartes and many others, essentially the same thing is true of *all* cases in which we experience or seem to experience external material objects or processes: in each such case, it is subjective sensations or subjectively experienced qualities that are experienced most immediately; and it is upon the experience of these subjective entities or processes or whatever exactly they are (more on this shortly) that the justification, if any, for the resulting claims about both the material world and my (less immediate) experiencing of it depends. This is obviously a major and not at all initially obvious philosophical thesis, for which

some substantial argument is accordingly required. One argument here is Descartes's own, invoking the specter of the evil genius. (This argument was briefly suggested but not developed in the previous paragraph—you should think more about just how much force, if any, it has.) We will look at some further, more widely advocated arguments shortly.

Before doing that, however, we need to probe further into the idea of immediacy itself. If something is experienced less immediately when the experience of it is dependent in these ways on an experience of something else, so that the latter experience is prior in both the causal and justificatory order, then a thing that is experienced *fully* immediately would apparently be one the experience of which is not in these ways dependent on the experience of *anything* else. The intuitive picture that proponents of immediacy seem to have in mind, often without articulating it very explicitly, is that the object of immediate experience is directly before “the eye of the mind,” directly present to its mental gaze. This is why the awareness of this object is not dependent in any way on the awareness of anything else. The fundamental Cartesian assumption is that it is with such immediate awareness that *all* justification that is not purely a priori begins.

Another quasi-metaphorical term that has sometimes been used to express this idea of immediate experience is *acquaintance*, sometimes also with the added adjectives “immediate” or “direct.”<sup>6</sup> Again the suggestion is that there is no gap of any sort between the mind and the object with which it is immediately or directly acquainted (as seems commonsensically to be the case when a person is directly introduced to someone else), thus no need for anything like inference, and accordingly also no room for doubt of any sort. (It is important to recognize that both such talk of acquaintance and the invocation of the “eye of the mind” are highly metaphorical in character; a large part of the issue here is just how appropriate these metaphors really are and how much weight they can bear.)

What things are we supposed to be immediately aware of or “acquainted” with in this sense? As we saw earlier, Descartes's view is apparently that we are immediately aware of the existence and contents of all of our conscious states of mind, a view that has been adopted by many others. These would include, first, sensory experiences of the sort that we have just been discussing, about which we will shortly have a good deal more to say. Included also would be, second, bodily sensations, such as itches, pains, tingles, and the like. These are naturally regarded as experiences of various events and processes in the physical body, but Descartes's point again would be that there is in each of these cases something directly or immediately present to consciousness, something that cannot be doubted, even though the more remote bodily

cause certainly can be.<sup>7</sup> The third main category of states of whose existence and content we are allegedly immediately aware are conscious instances of what are sometimes referred to as “propositional attitudes”: conscious beliefs or acceptances of propositions, together with conscious wonderings, fearings, doubtings, desirings, intendings, and so forth, also having propositional content. In these cases, the view would be that I am immediately aware both of the propositional content (what it is that is believed, doubted, or whatever) and of the distinctive attitude toward that content that such a state involves (believing or accepting it, wondering whether it is true, fearing that it might be true, and so forth). On the other hand, I am of course *not* immediately aware of the contents of those merely dispositional states that are also often classified as mental: dispositional beliefs and desires, emotions like fear or hatred or anger (as opposed to the conscious manifestations of those emotions), traits of character, and the like. (Think carefully about the difference between these two general kinds of things that are standardly included in the category of “mental states.”)

For epistemological purposes, the most important—and commonsensically implausible—part of this general set of doctrines is the view that in ordinary sensory perception, I never immediately or directly experience the ordinary objects and events in the material world that I seem to be perceiving, but instead only subjective objects or processes or states (the right category is not quite clear at this point) of the sort that have so far been indicated with the perhaps not altogether appropriate term “sensation.” If this view is correct, as was believed without much question by Descartes and his immediate successors (again, especially Locke), then, as we will see in the next chapter, it has very momentous consequences for the further issue of how beliefs about the material world are justified and indeed of whether they can be justified at all. We will look next at the two main arguments, over and above Descartes’s appeal to the evil genius, that have been offered for this general view.

## The Argument from Illusion

### First Stage

The standard label for the first argument (as indicated in the heading) is in fact something of a misnomer: it would be better described, as we will see, as “the argument from illusion, hallucination, and perceptual relativity,” with these two added kinds of examples probably playing in the end a more important role than examples of illusion proper. The argument was first stated explicitly by Berkeley,<sup>8</sup> but it is hard to avoid thinking that Descartes and

Locke also had something like it in mind. The argument falls fairly naturally into two main stages.

We will honor the traditional label by starting with an example of *illusion*. Consider the case of a straight stick, say an ordinary broomstick, that looks bent when half of it is immersed in reasonably clear water. (If you have never actually encountered such a case, it might be a good idea to perform this or a similar experiment yourself: a pencil in a clear glass of water will do fine.) The argument would then be as follows. What I am *immediately* aware of, the thing that is directly before my mind, that object or entity or whatever it is that is just *there* in my “visual field” in such a case, is undeniably bent: I observe directly that it has two straight sections that are clearly at an angle to one another. But the only relevant material object, the broomstick itself, is not bent in this way (as determined by viewing it out of water, feeling along it, inserting it successfully into a straight piece of pipe, and so on). Therefore, by the logical law that things having different, incompatible properties cannot be identical (one aspect of what is often referred to as “Leibniz’s Law”), the *immediate* object of my experience, the thing that according to the proponents of this argument really is bent, cannot be the physical broomstick, but must instead be something else that is apparently not to be found in the material world at all, but rather exists only in or in relation to my experience. The British philosophers John Locke and George Berkeley spoke here of “ideas” or “ideas of sense,” while more recent philosophers have used the term “sense-data” (singular: “sense-datum”—see further below).<sup>9</sup> But this latter term, especially, introduces a substantial amount of theoretical baggage that will be considered later on, but should not be presupposed yet. (You should try to think of other examples that are referred to as examples of perceptual “illusions,” and see if a parallel argument seems to apply to them; in some cases it will, but in others the application is at least not so straightforward.)

Consider now a second example, this time an example of *hallucination*. Having had quite a bit too much to drink, I seem to see very lifelike green rats scurrying around me, darting between my legs and under the furniture. In this case, so the argument goes, the things that I am *immediately* experiencing are undeniably green and variously rat-shaped: again such objects (or instances of whatever metaphysical category they ultimately fall into—see below) are just *there* in my visual field, not arrived at by inference or anything analogous to inference, but just basic, undeniable elements of my experience. But, although I may not fully realize this at the moment in question, there is in fact nothing at all in the immediately adjacent material world that has

these two properties of being green and rat-shaped, nor indeed, we may easily suppose, either one of them. I might come to know this by asking other people or perhaps by closing and locking the door and looking carefully after I have sobered up, but all that really matters is that it is true. Thus here too, it is argued, the green and rat-shaped elements undeniably present in my immediate experience cannot be identified with anything physical,<sup>10</sup> but must again apparently be entities that somehow exist only in or in relation to that experience. (Again, you should try to think of parallel examples and assess this general line of argument in relation to them.)

Consider, finally, an example of *perceptual relativity*. Looking from some distance at what I know independently to be a table with a rectangular top, I am immediately aware of a roughly trapezoidal shape, with what I think of as the closer edge of the table presenting an appearance that is quite discernibly longer than that presented by the farther edge. But there is once again no external material surface in the vicinity having such a trapezoidal shape, something that could again be determined in a variety of ways. Thus, it is argued once again, the trapezoidal element present in my immediate experience, since it has a shape that no material thing in the relevant vicinity has, cannot be identified with anything in the external material world and so must once more be some distinct experiential or experience-related entity that actually has the trapezoidal shape that I experience.<sup>11</sup> (Here too, you should try to think of parallel examples, which are in this case much more numerous and easy to find.)

The conclusion arrived at so far is that in all three of these examples and in others that are similar, the *immediate* object of my experience is not something in the external material world,<sup>12</sup> but rather some other sort of entity or entities with quite a different sort of nature and status (to be discussed further below). Obviously the first two examples, especially the second, are relatively unusual in character. But examples like the third one are much more common, reflecting an aspect that seems to be present in one way or another in virtually all of our perceptual experience. It is very, very common when perceiving a material object or situation to be immediately aware, at least in part, of properties, including relational properties, that the object or objects in question do not, according to our best judgments about them, actually possess: colors that are affected or distorted by such things as reflections, varied lighting, and colored glasses or windows; shapes that are in part a reflection of perspective and distance; perceived relative sizes that do not correspond to the actual sizes of the relevant objects; felt temperatures that are affected by whatever was handled just before; and so forth.

### Second Stage

If this conclusion is right (something that we will eventually have to consider further), then there are at least *many* cases of sensory experience (or, in the examples of hallucination, apparent sensory experience) in which what we immediately experience is something other than material objects and situations: relatively rare cases of illusion and hallucination and much more common cases of perceptual relativity. But nothing said so far comes even close to justifying the stronger thesis mentioned earlier: the thesis that what we are immediately aware of in *all* cases of sensory experience, whether actual or apparent, is *never* an ordinary, external material object. To support this much more sweeping conclusion, a second, supplementary stage of argument is needed, comprising three distinct, but mutually supporting subarguments.

First, it is possible to extend the result of the discussion of perceptual relativity in the following way. There are obviously lots of examples where a material object is experienced in which some of the immediately experienced qualities are not different from and incompatible with (at least not clearly so) the relevant qualities that common-sense judgment ascribes to that object. Thus, for example, although I can immediately experience a trapezoidal shape in connection with the table, I can also, by putting myself in an optimum position (think about how I might have to do this!), immediately experience a rectangular shape, one whose proportions correspond more or less exactly to the “real” shape of the table (as specified by common sense). And similarly for color, temperature, and many other kinds of perceivable qualities.<sup>13</sup> So far, then, the foregoing line of argument would provide no reason for thinking that when I experience these “true” qualities, I am immediately experiencing anything other than a material object itself.

But there is an important feature of at least many such cases that we need to take note of. Think again of the table example. Suppose that I have obtained a perspective from which I experience the “true” rectangular shape of the table. But suppose that I am, from that perspective, still not experiencing the “true” *color* of the table: in reality, it is a light blond color, but due to my colored glasses or the dim lighting, I am experiencing a much darker, more reddish shade of brown. Think now of what my actual experience would be like in such a case. What would happen, at least roughly, is that there would in a clearly intelligible sense be a rectangular patch of reddish brown color in my “visual field.” The issue we are presently considering is whether although my immediate experience of the color is not an immediate experience of the material table (since that isn’t its “true” color), my immediate experience of the “true” rectangular shape might still be an immediate experience of the table. But does this view really make good sense? After all, what both



outlines and fills the rectangular shape that I experience is precisely the very reddish brown color that I experience, so that apart from the awareness of the color, I would have no awareness of the shape. Given this intimate connection between them, it is hard to see how *that very shape* and *that very color* could be immediately experienced features of two quite different kinds of objects or entities, one an external, independently existing material object and the other an object, entity, or whatever it is that, as we have been putting it so far, exists only in or in relation to my experience. On the contrary, the immediately experienced object or entity or whatever it is that has the immediately experienced “true” shape seems necessarily to be the very same one that has the immediately experienced non-“true” color, so that if the latter is not the material table, then neither is the former.<sup>14</sup>

And there seem to be many other examples of the same general sort: examples (i) where though some of the immediately experienced qualities are those that commonsensically are the “true” qualities of the material object, others are not; and (ii) where the “true” qualities are related in experience to the “false” ones in such a way as it make it difficult or impossible to make sense of the idea that the entities to which the two kinds of qualities belong are distinct. To give one more example, if what I immediately experience in relation to an external, material sound has a pitch that is different from the sound’s true pitch (perhaps due to some problem with my ears), but a timbre that is the same as its true timbre then neither my immediate experience of the pitch nor my immediate experience of the inextricably connected timbre can be an immediate experience of the physical sound, since the same immediately experienced object has both properties. If this is right, then even many cases in which we immediately experience some of the “true” qualities of material objects will still turn out not to be cases where we immediately experience those material objects themselves. Exactly how far this argument can be pushed is not altogether clear, however, and it is at least not entirely clear that it has the result that ordinary, external material objects are never immediately experienced. (Think about this issue by considering a variety of examples for yourself. The main question is whether there are any clear examples of perception in which *all* of the set of immediately experienced qualities, or at least all those that are inextricably bound up with each other in the way indicated, can be plausibly regarded as the “true” qualities of the relevant material objects.)

Second, philosophers attempting to extend the conclusion of the first stage of the argument from illusion have pointed also to the fact that the conscious character of an immediate experience in which (assuming that we accept the first stage) we are immediately experiencing something other

than a material object is often *indiscernible* from the conscious character of an immediate experience in which we might still, for all that has been shown so far (not counting, for the moment, the first of the second-stage arguments just given), be immediately experiencing a material object itself. Thus if my experience of the green rats is sufficiently lifelike, which is apparently often true in such cases, I may well be unable to tell whether it is an experience of real green rats (dyed for some purpose) or not by simply scrutinizing the conscious experience itself. Instead, I will have to appeal to collateral information involving such things as my failure to find any trace of rats when I wake up in the morning or the fact that rats of that color do not occur naturally or perhaps my general awareness of my state of inebriation. Similarly, and even more obviously, if I want to distinguish cases where I am experiencing the “true” color of an actual object from cases in which I am not, it will do no good to carefully scrutinize the color experiences themselves. Instead, I have to rely on further information about lighting conditions, the presence of sunglasses, previous knowledge of the specific objects or kinds of objects in question, knowledge of the way in which light reflecting of a surface can produce a glare that distorts the “true” color, and the like.

The case of shape is more complicated and at least somewhat debatable. Clearly I can normally tell when I am looking at an ordinary object from the sort of perspective that makes something other than its “true” shape appear as the immediately perceived quality in my visual field. (Thus, while I am often fooled about the “true” colors of things, I am much more rarely fooled about their “true” shape.) But even here it is doubtful that my experience of the trapezoidal shape could be distinguished from my experience (from a different perspective) of the “true” rectangular shape of the tabletop simply by examining the conscious character of those shape experiences themselves. Instead, I am able to tell when I am experiencing the “true” shape by relying on cues having to do with my perceptions of the legs and other distinct parts of the table, my perceptions of other objects in the vicinity of or lying on the table, my knowledge of how light looks when reflected off such a surface at an angle, my background knowledge of this table and of tables in general, and so on. What I am suggesting is that in a case where all of these background elements were systematically eliminated, the immediate experience of the “true” shape would be indiscernible in its conscious character from the perspectivally distorted experiences that did not reflect the true shape. (Imagine a set of tabletops of various regular and irregular shapes, thin enough for the edges not to be very distinctly perceivable, hung at different angles to the observer by thin, invisible wires, and so lighted and of such surface reflectance as to give no clue to the angle on the basis of anything

like the presence or absence of glare. Then the point is that the immediate experiences of the various shapes would not be distinguishable as experiences of the “true” shapes or not simply by appeal to the conscious character of the experiences themselves.)

Suppose that we accept, at least provisionally, this claim that immediate experiences of “true” qualities are not distinguishable by appeal to their conscious character from immediate experiences of “false” qualities. The further argument is then that if in some cases the immediate object of experience is really an ordinary, external material object (such as the table), while in others it is something other than any such object, something that exists only in or in relation to the experience itself, then it would surely be reasonable to expect there to be *some* discernible difference between the conscious characters of these two sorts of experiences. The idea here is that if what is “directly before the mind” in these two sorts of cases is as different in nature as an external material object is from these subjective, mind-dependent or mind-related entities (whose nature we have admittedly not yet said anything very specific about), then this difference should surely make *some* difference to the conscious character of the experience itself. Thus if the two experiences are really indistinguishable in their conscious character, and if the immediate experiences involving “false” qualities cannot, as already argued, be immediate experiences of external material objects, it would follow that the immediate experiences involving “true” qualities are not *immediate* experiences of the external material objects either. Instead, it is suggested, what is *immediately* experienced in both sorts of cases are objects or entities or whatever exactly they are of the same basic kind, ones that exists only in or in relation to the experience. At least in the cases involving the “true” qualities, we can also be properly said to experience the material object that really has those qualities—but not *immediately*.

Third, in addition to the indiscernibility in conscious character of the immediate experiences involving “true” qualities and those involving “false” ones, there is also in many cases a striking *continuity* between immediate experiences of these two kinds. Consider the table case again, and suppose that I am able to move continuously from the immediate experience of the “false” trapezoidal shape to an immediate experience of the “true” rectangular shape. (Perhaps I am lying at the end of the sort of mechanically controlled movable platform used in making motion pictures.) Think of the series of immediate experiences that I would have in such a situation: first, of the clearly trapezoidal shape; then, as I move closer to being directly over the table, a series of less and less trapezoidal shapes (that is, shapes in which the angles of the sides in relation to the farther edge become smaller and those in relation

to the nearer edge larger, so that all of these angles gradually get closer to right angles); then finally an immediate experience of an exactly rectangular shape; and then, if I look back and continue to move, a series of shapes that are at first again slightly trapezoidal and then become more and more so.

According to the hypothesis being argued against, the one that accepts the first stage of the argument from illusion but still holds that at least some immediate experiences involving “true” qualities are immediate experiences of the external material object itself, all of the immediate experiences in this sequence except the one involving the exactly rectangular shape are immediate experiences of entities existing only in or in relation to experience, but that single immediate experience is an immediate experience of the table top itself. But, the argument now goes, this is very difficult to believe in light of the continuity just described. How can it be, given a series of immediate experiences that shade into each other so gradually and continuously, that at some point there is a radical shift of this sort in the object or entity or whatever it is that is being immediately experienced? Surely this sort of “jump” from the entities existing only in or in relation to experience (whatever exactly their nature may be) to an external material object would have to involve some sort of consciously discernible break or discontinuity in the experiential sequence? Thus if, as seems to be the case, no such break or discontinuity can be found, the conclusion indicated is that no such “jump” occurs, that the object or entity or whatever it is that is being *immediately* experienced at the instant when the shape is perfectly rectangular is of the same general sort as those being immediately experienced in the other cases, and thus is not an external material object.

The same sort of argument can be made for many of the other examples in which there are immediate experiences of both “false” and “true” qualities: lighting can be gradually varied, the darkness and tint of glasses gradually increased or decreased (think here of the sunglasses that darken gradually when exposed to sunlight and then lighten gradually when such light is absent), the broomstick can be very slowly and gradually immersed in the water, the motion that distorts the pitch of sounds can be varied gradually, and so on. To be sure, it does not seem to work for at least the most striking cases of hallucinations, such as the green rats, to which only the second of the three sub-arguments is really applicable.

### **The Argument from Illusion: Evaluation**

What evaluation should we make of the argument from illusion? Does it really establish the conclusion that it purports to establish, namely, that in sensory experiences (and apparent sensory experiences, as in the hallucination

case), we never *immediately* experience external material objects in the way that we commonsensically think that we do? This is a very complicated question that I will largely leave to you to consider and discuss, offering only a few further suggestions as to some of the issues involved. Pretty clearly in thinking about this question, you should think separately about the two main stages of the argument.

First, is there any defensible way to reject the conclusion of the first stage? This is very hard to do in the hallucination case, in which it seems most clear that there is *something* (though not necessarily, as we will see, a genuine *object*) being immediately experienced that cannot be an external material object. Could the conclusion be rationally rejected in the other sorts of cases? Could we say, for example, in the stick in water case that what is being immediately experienced is just the two parts of the material stick, with the circumstances merely creating the illusion that they are at an angle to each other? (But isn't it the *result* of that illusion that is immediately experienced, and what exactly is *that*?) Could we say in the table case that even where the immediately experienced shape is trapezoidal, we are still experiencing the material table, which merely *looks* trapezoidal from that perspective? (But what is it for it to *look* trapezoidal?) Could we perhaps even deny that there is anything genuinely trapezoidal involved? (But then what about that apparent shape in my visual field? What exactly is it?)<sup>15</sup>

Second, even if we were to decide that the first stage of the argument cannot be rejected, is there perhaps some defensible way to reject the conclusion of the second stage? Here the three subarguments need to be separately assessed. In fact, it is pretty clear that none of these is conclusive by itself, and hence also that they are not conclusive together.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for the first subargument, isn't it still possible that the immediate experience of the "true" shape could be an immediate experience of the material object, even though the conjoined immediate experience of the "false" color is not? And, in addition, it would be very difficult to show conclusively that *all* cases in which a "true" quality is immediately experienced are also cases in which at least one "false" quality is also immediately experienced in the closely connected way discussed earlier. (Again, can you think of clear cases to the contrary?) As for the second subargument, it is surely not impossible that immediate experiences of very different sorts of objects or entities might be indiscernible in their conscious character. (But isn't it nonetheless seriously unlikely, especially when the difference is this large?) And as for the third subargument, it is surely also not impossible that an indiscernible shift in what is being immediately experienced could occur in an experientially continuous series of such experiences. (But doesn't it again seem quite unlikely?) The issue that

you should think about is thus how strongly these subarguments separately and together support the conclusion in question.

### The Causal or Scientific Argument

The second main argument for the thesis that the immediate object of sensory (or apparently sensory) experience is never the external material object that we seem commonsensically to be perceiving (assuming that such an object is actually present) appeals to broadly scientific facts about the perceptual processes that are causally responsible, in at least normal, nonhallucinatory cases, for such experiences. Consider a perceptual experience in which I seem to see a light yellow ball about the size of a basketball sitting on the ground some distance away on the other side of my yard. What I immediately experience is something that occupies a round region in my visual field and is light yellow (with the sorts of perceived variations in color that seem to reflect the curvature of the ball's surface and the effects due to lighting and shadow). As so far described (and setting aside the argument from illusion for present purposes), this immediately experienced entity could just *be* a material ball. But is this really plausible, given our common-sense and scientific knowledge of the process of perception?<sup>17</sup>

If there really is a material ball of at least approximately the sort in question, then it may very well be *part* of the cause of my having that immediate experience. But it is surely not *all* of the cause. Think what else is involved and how these other elements could and perhaps do affect the experience that results. In the first place, my seeing of the ball depends on there being light of the right sort present in the situation and reflected off the ball toward my eyes. If the color or intensity of the light were different, the qualities that I immediately experience would also be different, even though the ball itself might be exactly the same. Second, the reflected light must be transmitted through the space separating me from the ball, and there are a variety of ways in which what occurs there could affect the experienced result, even though the ball itself is again unchanged. For example, if there were a colored haze in the air, this would affect the color that I experience. Or if there were panes of glass or pieces of transparent plastic, either large ones off in the distance or small ones that I wear like glasses, then they could affect either the color or the shape that I experience. Third, what I immediately experience depends on the functioning of the eye and the optic nerve, and there are a variety of ways in which defects or abnormalities here can affect what is ultimately experienced, even though the ball itself is again unchanged. Finally, the signal

from the eye needs to be received and processed in the brain, and again there are a variety of ways in which changes or abnormalities at this level can affect what I immediately experience, even though the material ball, assuming that there is one, once again remains unchanged. (There are lots of possibilities at each of these stages, and you should again use your imagination to explore and assess some of them.)

It is possible that in an actual case of the sort described, the character of my immediate experience is being affected in one or more of these ways. Perhaps, for example, I am suffering from jaundice, and this accounts for the yellow color; and my glasses are distorted in a way that affects the experienced shape and size. Suppose that this is so, and that the external object that is really there is white and egg-shaped and substantially smaller than it appears to be. How in such a case could I be said to experience it *immediately*?

But, of course, it might also be the case that no such distortion is taking place, and that I am experiencing the external ball exactly as it really is. Even then, is it not obvious that the character of my immediate experience is a result, not just of the ball and its characteristics, but of all of these other kinds of factors, even though they do not in this case produce any alteration or distortion? The conclusion that has seemed to many philosophers to follow from these considerations is that the object or entity or whatever it is that is *immediately* experienced is not the external material object, but is instead the end result in my mind of this complicated causal process to which that external object, if it exists, is merely one out of many contributing factors, and a relatively remote one at that. This is a conclusion that is strikingly similar to that of the argument from illusion.<sup>18</sup>

### Tentative Conclusion and Further Problems

We now have two different arguments in support of the thesis that what we immediately experience in actual and apparent sensory experience is not an external material object, but rather something else, something, as we have put it, that exists only in or in relation to the conscious experience in question. Philosophers have differed widely as to whether the resulting case for this conclusion is strong enough to compel rational assent, with earlier philosophers mostly accepting the thesis in question on this basis and recent ones being predominantly inclined to reject it. For the moment, I propose to conclude only that the conclusion in question is strongly enough supported to make it interesting and important to explore the consequences of accepting it, something that will occupy us for the rest of the present chapter and

most of the next. Eventually, toward the end of the next chapter, when those consequences have become reasonably clear, we will reconsider whether there is a defensible way to avoid accepting this claim.

Before we get to that point, there are two main issues to be considered. One is the metaphysical nature of immediate experience and its objects—including, as we will see, the issue of whether they are even properly described as *objects* at all. In the last part of the present chapter, we will consider the two most widely held views on this question: the *sense-datum* theory and the *adverbial* theory. As we will eventually see, the issue between these two views may well make no real difference to the epistemological questions that are our primary concern, but this can hardly be decided until we have examined them. The second main issue is how and indeed whether it is possible to justify beliefs about external material objects on the basis of perceptual experiences whose immediately experienced objects (or entities or whatever they turn out to be) are, as we are presently assuming, quite distinct from material objects. This will be the main topic of the next chapter.

### The Sense-Datum Theory

The sense-datum (plural: sense-data) theory is the historically more prominent view, growing as it does rather naturally out of the fuzzier talk of “ideas” or “impressions” to be found in philosophers like Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.<sup>19</sup> As the term itself suggests, sense-data are supposed to be the entities that are directly or immediately *given* (a variant term for immediately experienced<sup>20</sup>) in sense experience. But what exactly is the nature of such entities supposed to be?<sup>21</sup>

First, sense-data are supposed to be objects or entities that actually possess the very qualities that are immediately experienced. Indeed, much of the point of the notion is to *explain* why a material object that actually has one quality can lead to an experience of quite a different quality, or why, as in the rat hallucination case, qualities can be experienced when there is no material object having even approximately those qualities present at all. Thus, according to the sense-datum theory, if I experience a trapezoidal shape of a certain shade of dark reddish brown, then the immediate object of my experience is a sense-datum that actually is trapezoidal in shape and that shade of dark reddish brown in color. If I experience a bent shape in the stick case, then the sense-datum that I am immediately experiencing actually is bent in just that way. And when I hallucinate the green rats, the sense-data that I am immediately experiencing actually are green and rat-shaped. (Implicit here is the idea that while I can misperceive material objects, I cannot misperceive sense-data, for the sense-datum is precisely



what has whatever qualities I am most immediately aware of, leaving no apparent logical room for misperception.)

Second, there is an important and difficult issue here as to whether sense-data are two- or three-dimensional as regards their spatial characteristics. The historically most standard view has been that they are *two*-dimensional, and that the third dimension, though experienced in some sense, is actually a result of inference or suggestion, rather than being immediately experienced. Berkeley was the original philosopher to argue explicitly for this view, claiming that distance in the third dimension amounts to “a line turned endwise to the eye” and is thus incapable of being immediately seen.<sup>22</sup> Though a few philosophers have challenged this view, insisting that the third dimension is experienced as immediately as the others, we will mostly follow the more traditional view here.<sup>23</sup> There are also similar questions about whether sense-data are capable of having various other sorts of properties, though the underlying principle is always that they have *whatever* qualities are actually experienced immediately (and hence that any qualities that they are incapable of having are not immediately experienced).

Third, it is clear that sense-data are supposed to be distinct from ordinary, external material objects.<sup>24</sup> It is also clear that they cannot be identified with entities (or processes) existing in the brain, since these also fail in general to possess all of the immediately experienced qualities, most obviously colors.<sup>25</sup> Sense-data seem, therefore, to be distinct from *anything* in the material world. They have sometimes been thought of as existing in the mind, but if the mind is thought of in a Cartesian way as a nonspatial substance, it is difficult to see how it can literally contain entities having shape and color, as the sense-data involved in visual experience seemingly do. This in turn has sometimes led to the view that sense-data are *neither* physical nor mental in character, that they somehow exist in relation to the mind, but are not literally in it.<sup>26</sup>

Fourth, sense-data have often been thought of as *momentary* entities, incapable of persisting through time in the way that material objects and persons are commonsensically thought to do. In fact, there seems to be no clear reason why what is immediately experienced in a temporal passage of experience in which the immediately experienced qualities do not change could not be one and the same sense-datum (or set of sense-data) through the entire time in question. But since sense-data have been introduced solely as the bearers of immediately experienced qualities, there does not seem to be any easy way to make sense of their qualities changing over time, since there is no apparent basis on which to identify the sense-datum existing after a change in the immediately experienced qualities as the same one that

existed before the change. And since changes of some sort or other are almost ubiquitous in immediate experience, this comes at least very close to securing the result that sense-data never persist through time.

Fifth, an obvious question to ask is how many sense-data are being immediately experienced at a particular moment, for example, as I look across my study and out the window, seeing the edge of my computer table, a reading chair, a floor lamp, the window frame itself, the edge of the house, a number of trees, and patches of cloudy sky. Are there distinct sense-data for each object or perhaps even for each distinguishable part of an object, or is there just one large and variegated sense-datum having all of the immediately experienced qualities involved in the whole visual array? In fact, proponents of sense-data have worried very little about this issue, seeming to suggest that any of these answers will do, in a way somewhat analogous to the way in which it seems to make no real difference whether I think of, for example, my television set as one material object or as a collection of smaller material objects, where the division into smaller objects could be done in a wide variety of ways. (Is there in fact any serious issue here?)

Sixth, two more puzzling questions that have sometimes been asked are (i) whether sense-data can exist at times when they are not being immediately experienced, and (ii) whether the same sense-datum could be experienced by more than one person. The most standard version of the sense-datum theory gives a negative answer to both of these questions, and virtually all proponents of sense-data have given a negative answer to (ii). But the rationale for these answers is less than fully clear, in part because the nature of the entities in question is so puzzling. (For present purposes, I will simply assume that the two negative answers are in fact correct.)

It should be clear that sense-data are at least puzzling entities, particularly as regards their apparently being neither physical nor mental in character. But before attempting a further assessment of the view, we will consider its main rival, a view not formulated until the last century.

### The Adverbial Theory

The sense-datum theory is often characterized as an *act-object* theory of the nature of immediate experience: it accounts for such experience by postulating both an *act* of awareness or apprehension and an *object* (the sense-datum) which that act apprehends or is aware of. The fundamental idea of the adverbial theory, in contrast, is that there is no need for such objects and the problems (such as whether they are physical or mental or somehow neither) that they bring with them. Instead, it is suggested, merely a mental act or

mental state with its own intrinsic character is enough to account for immediate experience.

According to the adverbial theory, what happens when, for example, I immediately experience a dark reddish brown trapezoidal shape is that I am in a certain specific state of sensing or sensory awareness or of *being appeared to*: I sense in a certain manner or am appeared to in a certain way, and it is that specific manner of sensing or way of being appeared to that accounts for the specific content of my immediate experience. This content can be verbally indicated by attaching an *adverbial* modifier to the verb that expresses the act of sensing<sup>27</sup> (which is where the label for the view comes from). Thus in the example just mentioned, it might be said that I sense or am appeared to *dark-reddish-brown-trapezoid-ly*—where this rather artificial term is supposed to express the idea that the qualitative content that is treated by the sense-datum theory as involving features or properties of an object should instead be thought of as somehow just a matter of the specific manner in which I sense or the specific way in which I am appeared to. Similarly, when I hallucinate a green rat, I sense or am appeared to *a-green-rat-ly*—or, perhaps better, *a-green-rat-shape-ly*. And analogously for other examples of immediate experience.

The essential claim here is that when I sense or am appeared to dark-reddish-brown-trapezoid-ly, there need be nothing more going on than that I am in a certain distinctive sort of experiential state. In particular, there need be no object or entity of any sort that is literally dark reddish brown and trapezoidal—not in the material world, not in my mind, and not even in the netherworld of things that are neither physical nor mental.

### Assessment of the Sense-Datum and Adverbial Theories

How might the choice between these two different accounts of the metaphysical nature of immediate experience be made? Each of the two views has fairly obvious virtues and equally obvious drawbacks. The sense-datum theory accounts much more straightforwardly for the character of immediate experience. I experience a dark reddish brown trapezoidal shape because an object or entity that literally has that color and shape is directly before my mind. But both the nature of these entities and (as we will see further below) the way in which they are related to the mind are difficult to understand. (One more specific question worth asking here is whether we really have a clear understanding of how *shape* in particular could be a property of a nonphysical entity.)

The adverbial theory, on the other hand, has the advantage of being metaphysically simpler and of avoiding difficult issues about the nature of

sense-data.<sup>28</sup> The problem with it is that we seem to have no real understanding of the nature of the states in question or of how exactly they explain or account for the character of immediate experience. It is easy, with a little practice, to construct the adverbial modifiers: simply hyphenate the description of the apparent object of immediate experience and attach “ly” at the end. But it is doubtful that anyone has a very clear idea of the meaning of such an adverb, of what exactly it says about the character of the state—beyond saying merely, unhelpfully, that it is such as to *somehow* account for the specific character of the experience.

Here I will limit myself to a brief consideration of one further, less obvious argument on each side, and then to pointing out why the issue between these two views, though of great metaphysical significance, may not matter very much if at all for epistemological purposes. One major proponent of the sense-datum theory has advanced the argument that the adverbial theory cannot adequately describe cases in which we experience a number of different apparent objects having a variety of different properties in a way that keeps straight which object has which property.<sup>29</sup> Thus compare a case in which I am experiencing a red circle and a green square with one in which I am experiencing a green circle and a red square. In both cases, I might be said to be sensing or to be appeared to red-and-green-and-round-and-square-ly, thus apparently failing to capture the clear distinction between the two cases. And the suggestion is that only the sense-datum theory can successfully distinguish what is going on in such cases, by making explicit reference to each of the apparent objects.

But this objection seriously underestimates the resources available to the adverbial theory. In the example in question, the adverbialist can say that I sense red-circle-and-green-square-ly in the first case and green-circle-and-red-square-ly in the second case, thus capturing the difference between them perfectly well. More generally, if it is possible to capture the content of a particular immediate experience adequately in sense-datum terms, as the sense-datum theorist must surely agree that it is, then the adverbialist can construct a description that is equally adequate insofar as the present issue is concerned by simply making the entire sense-datum description the basis for his adverbial modifier, that is, by saying that the person is sensing or being appeared to [such and such sense-data]-ly, with the appropriate sense-datum description going into the brackets.

The additional argument in the opposite direction is, in my judgment, more telling. A sense-datum theorist needs some account of the relation between a person and a sense-datum when the former immediately experiences the latter. The natural thing to say is that the sense-datum somehow

influences the internal state of the person (that is, of his or her mind) in a way that reflects the sense-datum's specific character. But the resulting state of mind would then be just the sort of state that the adverbial theory describes, one which is such that a person who is in it will thereby experience the properties in question. And there would then be no apparent reason why such a state could not be produced directly by whatever process is supposed to produce the sense-datum, with the latter thus becoming an unnecessary intermediary. Thus the sense-datum theorist must apparently say that the immediate experience of the sense-datum does not involve any internal state of the person that reflects its character, but is instead an essentially and irreducibly *relational* state of affairs. The person simply experiences the sense-datum, but without there being any corresponding change in his or her internal states that would adequately reflect the character of the supposed sense-datum and so make its existence unnecessary in the way suggested. But does this really make good metaphysical sense, and, more importantly, would it allow the person to grasp or apprehend the nature of the sense-datum in a way that could be the basis for further justification and knowledge? It is very hard to see how such a view is supposed to work—how the character of the sense-datum is supposed to become internally accessible to the person in question.

Both views thus have serious problems, though, in light of the last argument, I would assess the problems of the sense-datum theory as the more serious. Fortunately, however, as already suggested, it does not seem necessary for strictly *epistemological* purposes to decide between these two views. The reason is that while they give very different accounts of what is ultimately going on in a situation of immediate experience, they make no difference with respect to the experienced content of that experience. And it is on that experienced content, not on the further metaphysical explanation of it, that the justificatory power, if any, of such an experience depends. Thus when we turn, in the next chapter, to the issue of whether and how immediate sensory experience can justify beliefs in external material objects, we may safely leave the issue between the sense-datum theory and the adverbial theory unresolved—though it will prove more convenient to talk as though the sense-datum theory is true, leaving the corresponding adverbial description of experience to be constructed by the reader in the way already indicated.