

### Objects and experience: Strawson

**SENSE PERCEPTION.** The very notion of sense perception involves dependence on the objective world. This is because sense perception is usually, pre-theoretically, taken to result in judgements about the world. But such judgements, if they are true, should 'conform' to the state of the world. The dependence, Strawson further insists, is a form of causal dependence; hence, any account of sense perception is in this general way a causal account. 60

**CONCEPTS IN PERCEPTION.** An old picture of sense perception, inherited from British empiricists, is one in which the subject passively receives 'ideas' or 'impressions' from the external world and transforms them, with the aid of reason, imagination, and other ideas, into judgement. 62

This picture should be supplanted by an alternative one, where concepts affect the way we perceive. That is, there is no bare perception devoid of concepts. We always see *something*, and this something is subsumed under concepts in very early stages of sense perception.

*Example 1.* If I write the symbols 'w.a.t.e.r.' on the board, you see them as an English word. But if I write the symbols 'в.о.д.а.', you don't necessarily recognise them as a word, let alone any definitive word.

Are our concepts adequate? That is, do they correctly represent how things are in the world? An answer to this question could mean providing an absolute justification of them, in which case we are supposed to stand outside any conceptual schema. Evidently this is impossible. Alternatively, we may choose to select a privileged set of concepts, secure from epistemological doubt, and then justify the rest by reference to the privileged few. Strawson here notes that this project is doomed. 63-64

**PHYSIOLOGY OF PERCEPTION.** Once we discover new facts about the particular causal mechanisms governing our perception, we may be tempted to relativize our judgements and our experiences to the facts about our own physiological organisation. Given how things are in the environment *and* how things are with me, I see this table now. But if a different creature had a different way of perceiving the world, he (it) would not perceive a table. In this instance the claim is trivial. Sure, a dog does not perceive a table, because in order to do so, the dog would have to come equipped with the concept of a table. 65

Nevertheless one might make a much less trivial claim. A creature different from me would not even perceive sensible qualities in the same way as I do. And if so, then those qualities do not belong to the objective things themselves. They are qualities, at least in part, of my own sensory organisation. This means that the way things are in themselves, their intrinsic qualities, are not accessible to my sense perception. What my perception is able to reach is only some representations of those qualities, fashioned by my own sensory modalities.

Strawson seems to take for granted that any creature whatever would perceive things in space. Things will always have positions, whatever modalities the creature possesses. This may be true, so far as it goes. It does not go very far, however, since the particular properties of space, i.e. of the space of one's perception, would again depend on the facts of the creature's physiology.

Strawson's response to this sceptical challenge is to emphasise the legitimacy of everyday, commonsensical judgements and perceptions. 'Things as they really are' may mean 'things as they are described by physical science'. Then we can admit that our perception does not reach that far. Yet it can also mean 'things as they are observed under normal, standard conditions'. Here the answer is the opposite. We can bring our organs into a condition of functioning normally, and that is when we say that we perceive things as they are. Under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, or when it is cleverly positioned in a bizarre landscape, I might not be able to perceive the table. This does not mean I should never be able to perceive it. It only means that the relevant obstacles outside and in myself must be removed. 66

One might reply, perhaps with Russell, that nothing said above undermines the ultimate authority of the physical viewpoint. If that viewpoint is granted such authority, then everyday perception can be dismissed as subjective and observer-dependent. Strawson's reply is to insist on the *intersubjective* feature of objectivity. We need not get obsessed by the physical description, or by a fantasy of reduction. Once we have perceptions whose standards of correctness can be agreed upon by different observers, this is sufficient for the ideal of objectivity. 67