

F O U R

Can Experience Be Understood?

THE CONCEPTION WE HAVE OF ANY INDIVIDUAL WE know nearly always starts with what he or she looks like. With most of our acquaintances this visual image always retains its lead—the instant their name is mentioned a visual image leaps into our minds. But this image is not any part of that person's being, it exists only in the eyes and minds of observers. It is not a constituent part of the body observed. Most of us have difficulty in envisaging what we look like to other people, precisely because our appearance is neither a part of our being nor a part of any experience we directly have ourselves. This is typical of the disjunction between things as we perceive them to be

and those things as they are in themselves. It holds across the whole range of experience. And because the representations of perception and conception have no part in the being of their objects, the selfsame objects may be, and often are, apprehended in different ways by different people.

It is possible for a congenitally blind person to know another individual intimately, more intimately than most other people know that person, without there being any visual-image content. Our congenitally blind friends do not know what we or they look like, and have no solid conception of what it means to say that anybody looks like anything, yet their being is in other respects the same as ours. They look like the people they cannot see or form any visual conception of. But “look like” is a category to which nothing in their direct experience corresponds. Used literally, it can have content and significance only in relation to seeing, but for almost the whole of its history our universe has had no sighted creatures. Presumably, for much of that time, it was similar to what it is now—but what did it look like? Either we cannot allow any meaning to that question or we have to say that it “looked” as it does now.

The corresponding truth holds not only for each one of our senses but for each of our mental faculties. Our conceptions and apprehensions of things are not constituent parts of the things apprehended. Their only “reality” is as experiences: as experiences they are indeed real, but their existence is wholly dependent on our existence. It is not an independent existence.

There is an independently existing reality apart from us, but they are not it. They are a set of correlatives to our capacities. Things *as we apprehend them* are, and have to be, in the forms of our sensibilities, and in the categories of our understanding. We are in the sort of situation an airline pilot is in, who from moment to moment is basing everything he does on the reading and interpretation of gauges that give him detailed information about specific states of affairs which he is directly up against and which are very real indeed, of vital importance to him, but are totally different from gauges.

If you say to me: "All right, then: if this woman whom you have known intimately and loved for many years is not made up of the perceptions you have of her, who or what is she?" the only truthful answer I can give you is: "I don't know." Is she an immortal soul? I don't know. Is she a perishable mind attached to a perishable body? I don't know. Is she nothing more than a material object? I don't know. I do not know these things even about myself, let alone her. Not having any idea what the true nature is of things we know intimately is our normal situation, and applies to our entire knowledge of the world of objects, including people, including ourselves.

In some ways this is the most difficult thing of all for us to grasp. Even if we truly understand that our apprehensions of things have to be in forms provided by the equipment we have for apprehending, we can scarcely help envisaging their independent existence as corresponding to our perceptions of them. Our first

response to the challenge this presents could be to react along the following lines—and let us, to begin with, think of a perceived object less complicated than a human being. You might say to me: “I can form a conception of that chair over there only in terms of its observational characteristics—its space-occupancy, what it looks like from every point of view, what it feels like to sit on, bump into, pick up, pat; the sounds it makes when I brush up against it or sink into it; all this plus everything revealed by a closer investigation, including measurements and a scientific analysis of the materials of which it is constructed. You cannot expect me to believe that each one of these characteristics is separate and free-floating, and that they all just happen by accident to have come together to give me the illusion of an object. There must be something there in which they inhere, so that none of them would be as they are if it were not as it is—so that what I am registering are *its* construction, *its* dimensions and weight, *its* materials and colours, *its* surfaces and textures; and these are providing me with my total picture of the chair. In this way, surely, my picture *corresponds* to the chair. So I see no reason why the chair should not be as I see it as being—and as I think of it as being when I am away from it. Why should objects *not* be as we apprehend and experience them, and as we think of them? What other way could there be for them to be?”

This response breaks down under interrogation. On analysis it turns out that no intelligible sense can

be attached to words such as “like” or “as” in this context. A thing can be like another thing only if the two are of a more generally similar kind. There is no literal sense in which a colour can be like something that is categorially different from a colour: a colour can only be like, or not like, another colour. Visual data of any kind can only be like other visual data. A photograph can be like a landscape, but only in so far as both are visual data. If it is claimed that what the two have in common is something to do with their form (what the young Wittgenstein called their logical form) and that this is an abstraction, it is an abstraction that is intelligible only in relation to visual data, and is characteristic only of such data. It can no more exist independently of such data than a man’s build can exist independently of his body. The same is true of everything that is yielded to our consciousness by our other senses, and also by our mental activities: a concept can be like only another concept. Basically, what is wrong with the objection we are considering is that it asks us to believe that sensory data *as such* can be like something categorially different from sensory data—not only “like” but “a copy”—and similarly that conceptions can be “like” something categorially different from conceptions. The mistake is easy to slip into—in fact it is difficult not to slip into it—because although we can query the categories of understanding that we have, we find ourselves unable to provide rationally defensible replacements for them.

When we live in the world of material objects in a way that comes naturally to us, what we are doing is reifying the contents of consciousness, taking them to be independent entities that are apprehended by us. In doing so we are attributing a separate existence to us-dependent phenomena. What we think of as a chair is the aggregate of its us-dependent characteristics—and we cannot help doing that, because there is no other way in which we could entertain any conception of it. Thus an illusion, or an almost irresistible tendency towards an illusion—what might appropriately be called the illusion of realism—is built into the human condition, and is an inherent part of the logic of our situation. To think at all, we have to think in terms of it, at least for most of the time. It is almost impossibly difficult for us to free ourselves from it. To do so by purely intellectual means, which is the only solidly grounded way of doing so,* requires not only self-discipline but an unprecedentedly large-scale act of truly liberated intellectual imagination, including something like a *Gestalt*-shift. It involves grasping that all our ways of thinking, perceiving and experiencing are contingent *in their entirety*; their very existence is not logically necessary, because everything that exists apart from us, whatever its nature, exists without them. Not

* There are religions whose metaphysical implications have something in common with what I am saying, and which train some of their followers in meditation aimed at releasing them from the illusion of realism; but such self-conditioning without an assured grasp of the intellectual foundations of what is involved seems to me undesirable.

only is there no need for perceptions and concepts: until recently in the history of the universe there were no such things, and it is simply a fact that, apart from living beings, most of what exists exists without any relation to them. Reality is not, and cannot be, “like” representations or thoughts.

This realisation is disturbing. We have a profound need, rooted in our need for survival, to believe that what exists does so in terms we can understand. The recognition that this is not so, and cannot be so, is disorienting. For these as well as other reasons we may not find it practically possible to let go of the idea that reality has the character of our experience. Most people, it would seem, never give that up, including most philosophers. They spend their lives in thrall to the self-contradictory assumption that epistemological objects, objects as we apprehend them in experience, exist independently of experience.

Because to think “outside” that assumption requires not so much intelligence as a radically free yet prehensile act of intellectual imagination, misunderstanders include individuals of the highest intelligence. The form of imagination required is rarer than intelligence. The most gifted of creative artists have it, including great writers, but I fear not many academics.

If it is true that independent reality transcends any possible experience we could have of it, this has profound implications for our understanding of death. For with death we cease to inhabit the empirical world, and the empirical world ceases to inhabit us. But if

the empirical world is not independent reality, the relationship we have with independent reality may not be at an end. There have always been many religious people who believed this—who believed that for the duration of our lives in the empirical world we are exiles from the world of *real* reality, with which we are reunited when we die. There may be some truth in this or there may not. I do not know. But it is a possibility. However, there is another apparent possibility that runs parallel to it but is apparent only, not a genuine possibility—and yet a large number of people take it to be.

All actual experience is for a subject, a sentient being who has the experience. With my death the experiences in this world of one sentient being will come to an end. Also, with the destruction of my body I shall cease to exist as an object in the multiple but separately unique worlds of other people. In the same way, with the death of every other individual, another unique sequence of experiences will come to an end, and he too will soon cease to exist as an empirical object in the worlds of others. What cannot happen, however, since there is no possible way in which it could, is the continuance of an empirical world without anyone in it at all—or perhaps I should say, without any minds in it. A world that exists only in experience could not exist if there is no experience. Yet this seems to be what most of us unthinkingly assume. We suppose that with the death of all of us, the world as we know it would carry on without us.

Kant is clear about the impossibility of this, in a statement that rules out the commonest of all misunderstandings of his work. “If the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of the senses in general, be removed . . . all the relations of objects in space and time, nay, space and time themselves, would vanish. As appearances, they cannot exist in themselves, but only in us. What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them—a mode which is peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared in by every being, though, certainly, by every human being.”

Anyone who protests “but of course the empirical world could go on existing without us in it” has radically failed to understand what is being said. He is not bound to *agree* with what is being said, but it represents a coherent and formidable view of such immense intellectual power that there cannot be any “of course” about its denial—if it is wrong, it is not wrong “of course.” “Of course” people reveal in those very words that they have no conception of the act of intellectual imagination that is required for an understanding of this viewpoint. If all experiencing subjects one day cease to exist, whatever is not experience will go on existing, but by definition that cannot be an empirical world.

In not being able to form any conception of “what it will be like” after we die our situation has something

in common with our not being able to conceptualise what it is like now. We cannot form any conception of the multitudinous empirical worlds that exist now, apart from our own. We know that billions of separate consciousnesses are at this very moment aware of a world, and we know that each of them is different from every other, but the sum of the unique experiences thus occurring simultaneously is not something that can be present in a single consciousness, at least not in this world. Schrödinger wrote that consciousness is a singular of which the plural is unknown, but I find myself reflecting that he should have added “and unknowable, though we know it to exist. *Knowing* it is a form of consciousness attributed to God.”

When I die this unique empirical world of my knowledge and experience (and memories) will come to an end. What happens then will depend on the relationship, if there is one, between, on the one hand, me and my empirical world *taken together*, reciprocal as they are, and on the other hand whatever exists independently of them. It could be that I and my empirical world relapse into nothingness. But this is not certain. What presents itself to me now as nothingness might be as deceptive in this as the empty air around me before I switch on my pocket radio, or the visual world to a congenitally blind man about to get his sight. I am not confident about this—in fact, I am exceedingly doubtful—but the possibility exists.