Nature and Lifeworld

Theoretical and practical Metaphysics

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Perception as the Bridge between Nature and Life-World

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Abstract

The main claim in "Perception as the Bridge Between Nature and Life-World" is that philosophy once again has to discuss the old problem of direct realism. According to modern psychology of perception we are never in our perceptions in direct contact with the external world, but in our everyday lives we take direct veridical perception for granted most of the time. Our culture contains an epistemological contradiction. Therefore, phenomenological philosophers should allow themselves to drop the method of epoché, and analytic philosophers should not confine themselves to language analysis. In the paper, some peculiar consequences of direct realism are highlighted. Modern direct realists have to accept that veridical perception (a) is x-ray perception (i.e. we perceive through *material things), (b) is backward perception (i.e. we perceive* backwards in time), *and (c) that such perception contains a* connection at a distance; *they also have to accept (d) that our ego has no determinate spatial and temporal limits. The main alternative to direct realism seems to be some kind of monadology. It is claimed, however, that a monadology is even worse off than direct realism is. Therefore, the philosophical problems of direct realism have to be discussed.*

Something is rotten in the state of our knowledge. Science imposes a gulf between nature and the life-world which is invisible to both scientists and philosophers.

(By 'nature' I mean the world as it would be if man passed out of existence; by 'life-world' I mean the perceptual world in which we live our everyday lives. The world in which we meet other people, talk with them, work with them, quarrel with them, but also the world in which we come across and work on things. Nature, I here take for granted, exists independently of man, whereas, of course, our life-world does not.)

The Cartesian-Lockean heritage

In our philosophically non-reflective lives, we all of us take it for granted that we often perceive a man-independent nature. In our life-world (and, I think, in the life-world of most – probably all – cultures) nature is part of the life-world. Modern perceptual psychology, however, has since long implicitly taught that we do not directly perceive nature. One might think that one of the aims of perceptual psychology is to explain the mechanisms we use to perceive the world, but perceptual psychology puts forward theories which tell us that in our perceptions we cannot be in contact with nature. Of course, nature is regarded as one kind of *cause* of our perceptions, but such causes are regarded as wholly external to our perceptual acts. Our life-world subscribes to direct realism, our science subscribes to indirect (representative) realism. This is not acceptable; especially not since science nowadays is part of the life-world, too. Our life-world is incoherent. Something philosophical has to be done.

When modern philosophy emerged, both Descartes and Locke sketched the outlines of what was, some centuries later, to become the specialized sciences of perceptual psychology and sensory psychophysics. According to their story, ordinary veridical perception consists of a causal chain starting in the thing to be perceived, then passing through space to our body, into our body, and into our sensory organs. By different mechanisms the causal process is assumed to proceed through the body and in the head, in order to end somewhere in the brain. Here, at last, the perception itself is said to occur. Hence a perceptual act in which a thing is perceived is necessarily distinct from this thing itself, both spatially and temporally. The thing and the corresponding perception must be spatially distinct since the thing and the brain are in different places, and they must be temporally distinct since the causal process takes time. Furthermore, things and perceptions are categorially different. Things are material but perceptions are mental. The Cartesian-Lockean philosophy of perception implies that nature is wholly outside our life-world. Locke wrote as follows:

> This is certain: that whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the mind; whatever impressions are made on the outward parts, if they are not taken notice of within, there is no perception. Fire may burn our bodies with no other effect than it does a billet, unless the motion be continued to the brain, and there the senses of heat, or *idea* of pain, be produced in the mind; wherein consists *actual perception*.[2]

Descartes made the same point in the following way:

> We must know, therefore, that although the mind of man informs the whole body, it yet has its principal seat in the brain, and it is there that it not only understands and imagines, but also perceives; and this by means of the nerves which are extended like filaments from the brain to all the other members, with which they are so connected that we can hardly touch any part of the human body without causing the extremities of some of the nerves spread over it to be moved; and this motion passes to the other extremities of those nerves which are collected in the brain round the seat of the soul, as I have just explained quite fully enough in the fourth chapter of the Dioptrics. But the movements which are thus excited in the brain by the nerves, affect in diverse ways the soul or mind, which is intimately connected with the brain, according to the diversity of the motions themselves. And the diverse affections of our mind, or thoughts that immediately arise from these motions, are called perceptions of the senses, or, in common language, sensations.[3]

Locke remained on the abstract level of the considerations presented in these quotations, but Descartes tried to fill in the concrete details of the causal process. He put forward many hypotheses about different kinds of particles moving around in our body. In particular, he thought that there are some extremely small material particles, misleadingly called *animal spirits*, which are able to connect the sensory organs and the brain. There is no philosophical reason for learning about this detailed picture today. It was presented mainly in *L'homme*, which was published after his death. However, in figure 1, three drawings from that book are reproduced.[4]

Both Descartes and Locke were ontological dualists, although, epistemologically, Descartes was a rationalist and Locke an empiricist. Let us look at the relationships between their ontologies and their epistemologies. For an empiricist, an ontological dualism between mind and matter creates an insurmountable epistemological problem. Bertrand Russell, for one, has made this point forcefully:

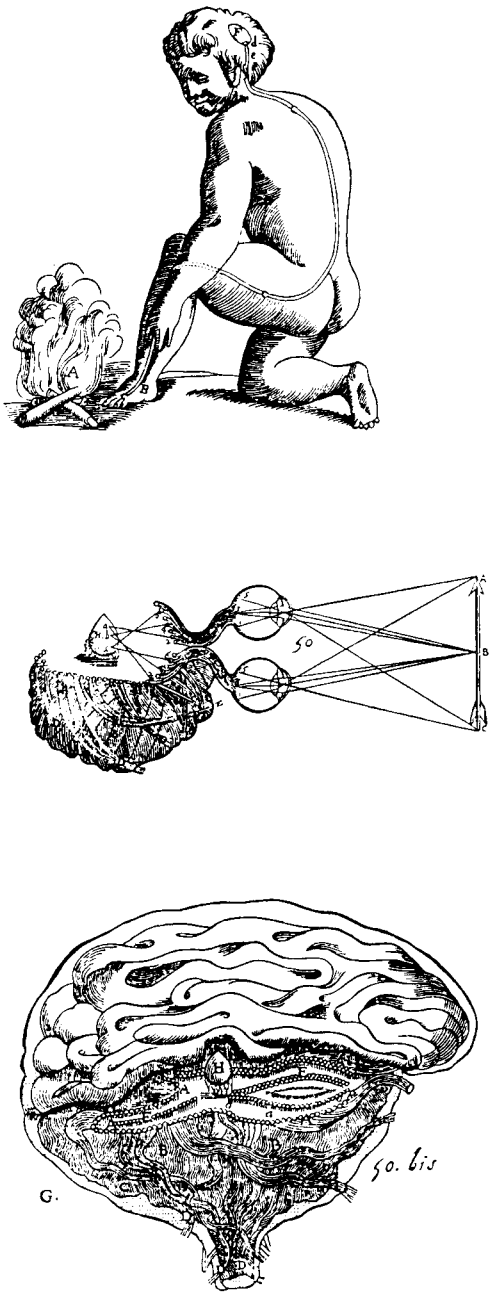

Figure 1.

> In all this, Locke assumes it known that certain mental occurrences, which he calls sensations, have causes outside themselves, and that these causes, at least to some extent and in certain respects, resemble the sensations which are their effects. But how, consistently with the principles of empiricism, is this to be known? We experience the sensations, but not their causes; our experience will be exactly the same if our sensations arise spontaneously. The belief that sensations have causes, and still more the belief that they resemble their causes, is one which, if maintained, must be maintained on grounds wholly independent of experience. The view that 'knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas' is the one that Locke is entitled to, and his escape from the paradoxes that it entails is effected by means of an inconsistency so gross that only his resolute adherence to common sense could have made him blind to it.
>
> This difficulty has troubled empiricism down to the present day.[5]

Most post-Lockean British empiricists, from Berkeley to Russell, have freed themselves from Locke's inconsistency by becoming ontological idealists or phenomenalists. Although rationalists do not have exactly the same epistemological problem, they have one which is structurally similar. How does reason, which resides in mind, come to know anything about material *particulars*? Descartes was of the opinion that in order to silence all doubts about the existence of the external world, a proof for the existence of God was needed. Most of the great rationalist continental thinkers who followed Descartes, became, like Leibniz, idealists. Kant, of course, retained the thing in itself but made it unknowable. In my opinion, no materialist thinker has so far really solved the Cartesian-Lockean problem of perception. A metaphysical realist should be able to connect nature and the life-world.

Modern physics and perceptual psychology has discovered a lot about all the material processes which are necessary for veridical perception, and have shown that Descartes' detailed hypotheses were false. Broadly speaking, collisions between material particles have been replaced by electromagnetic interaction and chemical reactions, and animal spirits have been replaced by synapses and neurons, but nonetheless the abstract picture is the same. It implies an ontological gulf where nature and life-world are kept apart. Perceptual psychologists take the existence of a man-independent nature for granted, but, according to their theories, no part of nature can be a real part of a perceptual act.

It is possible to distinguish between three different paradigms or perspectives "that inform contemporary investigations of perception".[6] One, "the inference and empiricist perspective", is closely connected with Locke,

although its major figure is Hermann von Helmholtz. According to this perspective, perception consists of two parts, sensation and interpretation; and interpretation is regarded as built up only out of earlier sensations. Association of ideas is the main explanatory principle. A distinction between sensation and interpretation is also to be found in "the Gestalt perspective", but here interpretation is seen as stemming from innate ideas and from mind's own creative ability. Descartes, Kant, and Gestalt psychologists are among those who should be placed in this paradigm. However, differences notwithstanding, both the empiricist and the Gestalt perspective imply the dualism between nature and life-world which I have described.

The third theoretical perspective, which I would like to call the Gibsonian perspective,[7] denies that veridical perception can be split up into two parts, sensation and interpretation. The founding father, J. J. Gibson,[8] distinguishes between sensory receptors which respond to stimulus *energy* and perceptual systems which respond to stimulus *information*. The perceptual (visual, auditive, etc.) systems are assumed to be active, to interact with each other, and to be able to respond *without any process of interpretation* to stimulus information. The concept of stimulus information is one of Gibson's theoretical creations. According to Gibson, if one takes into consideration all light, reflected as well as non-reflected, it is possible to demonstrate that this *ambient light* contains structures and invariants which contain information about the environment. These structures and invariants can remain the same even when frequencies and intensities of the light change. The properties which sensory psychophysics has studied, e.g. frequencies and and intensities of electromagnetic radiation, is given a very subordinate role. The receptors in the eyes cannot discover such invariants, but, Gibson claims, the visual perceptual system can. He also assumes that our perceptions often give us correct information about nature. Sometimes, as in the following quotation, he even seems to be a direct realist in the sense that I use this term.

> It seems to me that these hypotheses make reasonable the common sense position that has been called by philosophers direct or naive realism. I should like to think that there is sophisticated support for the naive belief in the world of objects and events, and for the simple-minded conviction that our senses give knowledge of it.[9]

In spite of this quotation, and in spite of all the philosophical advantages which I think Gibson's perspective has compared with the other ones, he is not a real direct realist. Stimulus information is assumed to travel by means

of electromagnetic radiation from the things perceived to the perceiving persons. The uptake of stimulus information is made at the surface of the body. Even in Gibson's theory, a thing perceived seems to be regarded as being wholly external to the perceptual act in which it is perceived. Gibson has never discussed the problems which I shall try to highlight below under the headings *connection at a distance*, *x-ray perception*, *backward perception*, and *the changeful limits of our ego*. Gibson might be called an epistemological realist but not an ontological realist. He says that veridical perception contains no process of interpretation and that it give us direct knowledge of the world, but he does not say that a veridical perceptual act *contains* parts of that which is perceived.

If we abstract from the differences between Descartes, Locke, and competing perspectives within modern perceptual psychology, we find a common core which can be illustrated as in figure 2 (where there are two persons who perceive the same tree). The point of the picture is that the Cartesian-Lockean heritage is monadological in its ontological import. Every mind is closed within itself. It is numerically distinct both from all other minds and from all external things and states of affairs which are said to be perceived in veridical perception. In contradistinction to Leibniz's monadology, however, the monadology of perceptual psychology has a materialistic basis. Perceptual acts are assumed to have material causes, and different minds are assumed to be connected with different material bodies. Bodies can directly interact with each other, but the minds cannot. When two

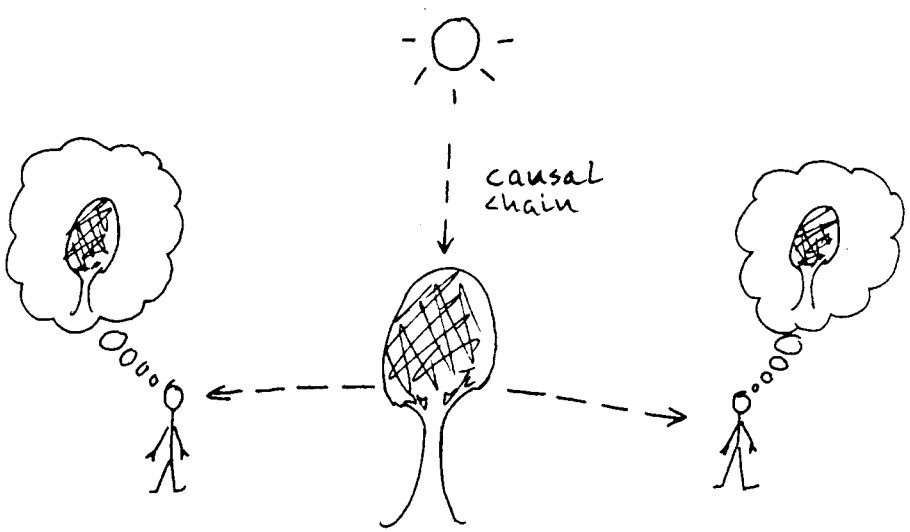

Figure 2.

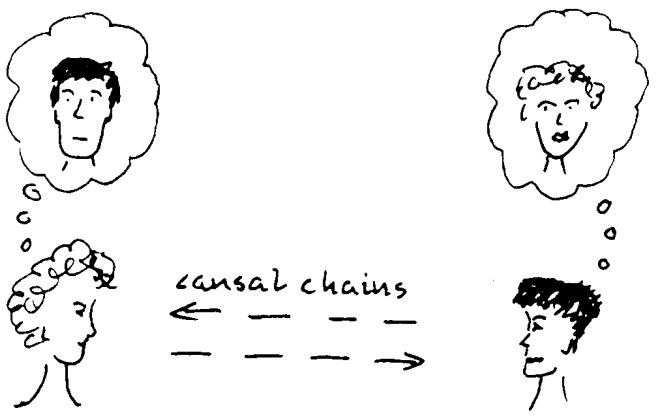

Figure 3.

people look into each other's eyes, the situation can be pictured as in figure 3. According to perceptual psychology, if you look into your beloved one's eyes, you will really not see her eyes. You will only see eyes in your own mind which are partially caused by her eyes. If she whispers sweet words, you will only hear words which exist in your own mind. A sad story, I would say. Ontological narcissism, as it may be called, is the necessary consequence of such a theory.

Phenomenology and Analytic philosophy

If we look at 20th century philosophy, there is not much awareness of the problem I have sketched. There are mainly two reasons for this neglect: the focus on logic and language within analytic philosophy and the 'bracketing' of the sciences within the phenomenological movement. Since we owe the concept of life-world to Husserl and Scheler, I shall first comment on the phenomenological movement.

The central concept of phenomenology is that of *intentionality*. Perceptions and thoughts are the main examples of intentional acts. In both perceptions and thoughts we are *directed* at something; sometimes at something existing, sometimes at something non-existing. The aim of phenomenology is to study phenomena as they are given in our intentional acts. In order do to this accurately, according to (the middle late) Husserl, we have to perform the *epoché*, i.e. we have to suspend judgements. In particular,

we have to bracket, or put within parentheses, all scientific explanations of how the phenomena to be studied are caused. Such explanations, it is claimed, refer to entities which are external to the phenomena in question. Also, we should bracket the question whether anything transcends intentionality. In this way the whole Cartesian-Lockean problem is simply put within parentheses. It was not to be dealt with, neither epistemologically nor ontologically, by phenomenologists.

Later on Husserl himself introduced the methods of transcendental and eidetic reductions, and other phenomenologists made other changes. But there is one thing all these changes within the phenomenological tradition have in common, the Cartesian-Lockean problem is pushed aside. According to the phenomenologists, when two people in the life-world perceive the same tree, they do perceive the same tree, and when two people look into each other's eyes, they do see each other's eyes. In the life-world we are direct realists, and most phenomenologists seem to rest content with knowing this. The method of epoché (and similar procedures) gives us the nature of the life-world but not the real man-independent nature which natural scientists think they are studying, it gives us the intersubjectivity of the life-world but not real intersubjectivity rooted in man-independent nature. Not even so-called realist phenomenologists (e.g. Roman Ingarden and John Wild) have taken the implications of natural science seriously. This is very clear in a recent book in this tradition with the telling title *Back to 'Things in Themselves'*.[10] Here, the traditional epoché of phenomenology is very explicitly thrown away. The author argues for the existence of objective knowledge of a mind-independent world, but he does not discuss the Cartesian-Lockean problem of perception in spite of the fact that he writes that "Phenomenology proper is so far from being opposed to causal explanations of things that it even calls for them."[11]

The Cartesian-Lockean view emphasizes that there is a causal chain directed *from the perceived thing to the perceiving person*, whereas 'the life-world view' emphasizes that there is intentionality directed *from the perceiving person to the perceived thing*. If both kinds of directedness are represented by an arrow, the arrows will point in diametrically opposed directions (see figure 4). It can be noted that many theories of perception in antiquity really assumed that in vision there is a causal process which has the same direction as visual intentionality. Something was assumed to emanate from the eye and go *from the eye to the thing perceived*. John Burnet, in his famous *Early Greek Philosophy*, says that "what is characteristic of Greek theories of vision as a whole, /is/ the attempt to combine the view of vision as a radiation proceeding from the eye with that which attributes it to an image reflected in the eye."[12] He also writes:

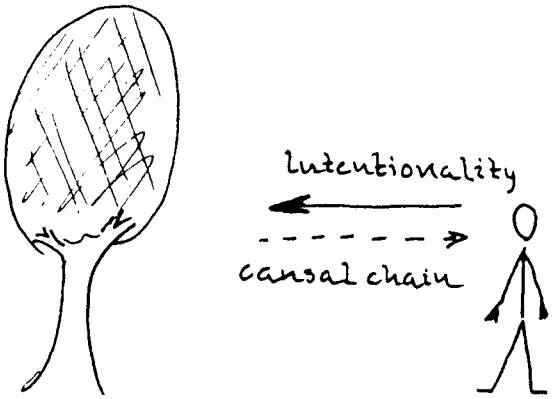

Figure 4.

> /Empedokles'/ theory of vision is more complicated; and, as Plato makes his Timaios adopt most of it, it is of great importance in the history of philosophy. The eye was conceived, as by Alkmaion, to be composed of fire and water. Just as in a lantern the flame is protected from the wind by horn, so the fire in the iris is protected from the water which surrounds it in the pupil by membranes with very fine pores, so that, while the fire can pass out, the water cannot get in. Sight is produced by the fire inside the eye going forth to meet the object.
>
> Empedokles was aware, too, that "effluences," as he called them, came from things to the eyes as well; for he defined colours as "effluences from forms (or 'things') fitting into the pores and perceived." It is not quite clear how these two accounts of vision were reconciled, or how far we are entitled to credit Empedokles with the theory of Plato's *Timaeus*. The statements quoted seem to imply something very like it.[13]

Phenomenology, in particular the technique of the epoché, has in my opinion taught us a lot about the content of various perceptions. However, if we want a whole world-view we cannot in principle suspend our judgements about presumed causal explanations and try to be free from ontological commitments. The method of epoché has done its job and we have to face the conflict between the explanations of perceptual psychology and the findings of phenomenological philosophy. Something has to change somewhere. But let us first take a quick look at analytic philosophy.

Analytic philosophy has contained two main sub-traditions. One with Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell as the great ones among the founding fathers, and the other with G. E. Moore in a similar role. In the first one, philosophy came to be identified with conceptual analysis, logic and the

construction of artificial languages; in the second sub-tradition, philosophy was in some way or other to be confined within the limits of ordinary language. However, as is often the case, the founding fathers were somewhat atypical; at least in the beginning. Russell was a real metaphysician who (now and then) advocated phenomenalism, and in the paper which triggered off Moore's career, *The Refutation of Idealism*,[14] Moore defended direct realism without any appeals to common sense or to ordinary language. Later on, of course, he changed strategy and tried to make common sense the final arbiter in both epistemology and ontology. Founding fathers apart, the important thing now is that in both these sub-traditions natural science, realistically conceived, was put aside and philosophy was restricted to language. Each in their own way, like the phenomenological movement, put realist science within parenthesis.

In the Russellian line of analytic philosophy, science was highly esteemed, but it was claimed that philosophers *as philosophers* could not say anything about the world. Scientists were accorded a monopoly on claims about the world; philosophers could only indirectly be of help in the attempt to get knowledge about the external world. Philosophers could analyse the concepts of science but no more. This is the so-called underlabourer conception of philosophy. Logical positivism, which belonged to this sub-tradition, turned most scientific theories into instrumentalist theories by means of their principle of verifiability. Ontological problems were disclaimed to be literally meaningless. This means that it is impossible to discuss what I have called the Cartesian-Lockean heritage.

In the ordinary language tradition science was given no prominence at all. Moore's classic *A Defence of Common Sense*[15] could just as well have been called *A Defence of the Life-World*. Common sense is for Moore more secure than science. Later on, Gilbert Ryle and the so-called Oxford Philosophy, explicitly claimed that the central aim of philosophy is to analyse ordinary language; or, to use Ryle's phrase, "determine the logical geography of concepts" and "rectify the logical geography of the knowledge which we already possess".[16] In Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* this move amounts to almost exactly the same thing as the epoché of the phenomenological movement. Before he mounts his attack on the Cartesian ghost in the machine he says that: "It will be argued here that the central principles of the doctrine are unsound and conflict with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them."[17]

It was also within Oxford philosophy that the life-world conception of *agency* first entered analytic philosophy. I think there is a simple reason why ordinary language philosophy is so close to the phenomenological philosophy of the life-world. Without perception there is no language, and

ordinary language is permeated by ordinary perception. In everyday life, we *say* we simply see a tree or see another person because that is the way the world is *perceptually presented* to us. At Royaumaunt in France 1958, Oxford philosophers met phenomenological philosophers at a conference. Ryle read a paper called *Phenomenology versus 'The Concept of Mind'*.[18] In the discussion which followed both Herman van Bréda and Maurice Merleau-Ponty stressed that there are strong similarities between Ryle's views and those of the phenomenological tradition. Van Bréda said:

> It seems to me – and I will conclude with this minor point – that many phenomenologists practice in Europe, after Husserl, the same genre of analysis which occurs at Oxford; but they do not have the same temptation – pardon my use of this word – to hypostatize language [*langage*], to hypostatize expression [*langue*], to hypostatize the concept and the word; in this instance the Oxford analysts show themselves to be excellent Platonists, which Husserl is not.[19]

Merleau-Ponty made in the discussion it clear that he had worked with Ryle's book,[20] and he started his contribution as follows:

> I have also had the impression, while listening to Mr. Ryle, that what he was saying was not so strange to us, and that the distance, if there is a distance, is one that he puts between us rather than one I find there.[21]

So much for phenomenology and analytic philosophy in relation to science and the Cartesian-Lockean problem. Similar things can be said also about the philosophy of later Wittgenstein and German hermeneutics. In my opinion, these traditions have taught us a lot about ordinary language, scientific language, perception and intentionality in general, but they are all wrong in denying the Cartesian-Lockean problem admission to philosophy.

Connection at a distance

Phenomenology has taught us that reductive materialism is obviously false. We all intermittently have intentional acts (veridical and illusory perceptions, images, acts of imagination, dreams, thoughts, etc.). This is impossible to deny. It is a truth as secure as any scientific truth; and intention-