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IS THERE A PROBLEM ABOUT APPEARANCES?

Many people at various times have been puzzled by the fact that there is a difference between things as they are and things as they appear. And they have spent considerable intellectual effort in an attempt to give an account of this difference which seemed to them intelligible.

In recent years, however, we have been repeatedly assured that there is nothing here to be puzzled about. Austin, for example, in his lectures on Sense and Sensibilia, took this view. "What is wrong" he asked, "what is even faintly surprising, in the idea of a stick's being straight but looking bent sometimes? Does anyone suppose that if something is straight, then it jolly well has to look straight at all times and in all circumstances? Obviously no one seriously supposes this. So what mess are we supposed to get into here, what is the difficulty?"

This is a challenge, and it is clearly incumbent on those of us who think there is a difficulty to say what it is as clearly and precisely as we can. This is what I propose to do in this paper.

I

To begin with, we need to remind ourselves of some of the different uses of the words 'appear' and 'appearance'. We need to do this in particular because there is one use in connection with which the difficulty we are discussing simply does not arise. This is the use in which we speak, for example, of a ship appearing on the horizon, or list the cast of a play in the order of their appearance. When 'appear' is used in this way, it suggests a reference to a relation between two terms—the thing which appears and the person to whom (or before whom) it appears. There will be some who wish to give a further analysis of this "subject-object" relation, but this need not concern us here. What is certain is that this is not the use of 'appear' which people have in mind when they distinguish between how things are and how they seem. When we speak of a ship appearing on the horizon, it does not make sense to say that it appears as it is or in any other way; it simply appears.

When someone is asked, however, how the ship appears to him, it is quite different. The question invites an answer like 'It appears small to me'. We have here a use of 'appear' where it is no longer a matter of something appearing to somebody, but of something appearing so-and-so to

2H. H. Price has recently named this the "absolute use" of 'appear'. See "Appearing and Appearances" in American Philosophical Quarterly, 1964, p. 5. The distinction I here make is the same as that made by Price between the absolute and predicative uses.
somebody, or of it appearing to him to have such-and-such a characteristic. The formula is not ‘T appears to P’, but ‘T appears A to P’. And this difference is clearly of great importance. For with the second formula, it is left an open question whether the thing does actually have the characteristic. This is where the distinction comes in between the description of the thing as it is and the description of the thing as it appears. Hence it is in connection with appearance in this sense that the difficulty we are discussing is said to arise.

What then is the difficulty? Clearly it has to do with the expression ‘the thing as it appears’. We know what it is to describe things, mentioning their properties and their relations to other things. And we commonly assume that we could give a complete account of the world in terms of things (or, let us say, “entities”), their properties and relations. But it is not at all clear how things as they appear can be fitted into such an account of the world. The world includes straight sticks and bent sticks, but not straight sticks as bent—nor, for that matter, straight sticks as straight. “Things as they appear”—hence also “things as they are”—cry out for some analysis which will enable us to avoid such metaphysical monstrosities.

It is true, of course, that in ordinary life we accept the distinction between appearance and reality as a perfectly familiar one. As Austin points out, no one is surprised at the idea of a stick being straight and looking bent. But all this shows is that in ordinary life most of us have neither the time nor the patience to consider the difficulty: it does not show that there is no difficulty. In fact it may be said that the terminology of appearances is an extremely neat device, embedded in ordinary language, for registering the distinction while ignoring the difficulty.

The difficulty as I have stated it so far is due to the assumption that a complete account of the world can be given in terms of entities, properties and relations. But it may be said that a simple analysis can be given of our talk about “things as they appear” which does not come into conflict with this assumption. Just as ‘T appears to P’ suggests a reference to a relation between two terms, so ‘T appears A to P’ suggests a reference to a relation between three. In this case, we have not only the thing which appears and the person to whom it appears, but also the characteristic which the thing appears to the person to have. Appearing is thus to be understood as a triadic relation involving a thing, a person, and a property.

Such an analysis, however, will still not satisfy our demands. Our basic assumption is not merely that an account of the world can be given in terms of entities, properties and relations; it is that it can be given in terms of entities which have properties and relations. We automatically rule out free-floating properties which are not the properties of any entities at all.

3"Thing" suggests exclusion of persons, also those possible fleeting entities which some have called "events".

4It may be recalled that this analysis was proposed by Dawes Hicks (see Critical Realism (London, 1938), Study No. III) and christened by Broad "the multiple-relation theory of appearing" (see The Mind and its Place in Nature (London, 1925), Ch. 4, pp. 178-180).
We therefore rule out the property which is set down as the third term of our triadic relation. The bentness which the stick appears to have but in fact does not have persists as a metaphysical oddity of which we desire to be rid.

II

Much traditional argument, I have suggested, has been concerned with this problem. And there is, of course, one traditional solution to it which we can recognize straight away as a very natural one. This is to anchor the free-floating property by maintaining that it belongs to an entity, existing in its own right. The bentness which does not belong to the stick, we say, must belong to something. What more natural than to say it belongs to the appearance of the stick? To avoid being misled, what we should do, on such a view, is to replace ‘T appears A to P’ by some such formula as ‘T has the appearance A for P’. We then have three entities related to each other in ways which should cause no trouble.

If we make this move, we should be aware that we are introducing a shift in the use of the word ‘appearance’. So far I have not been concerned with the distinction between the verb ‘appear’ and the noun ‘appearance’, and so long as ‘appearance’ is used as a merely derivative abstract noun, no such concern is necessary. To describe the appearance of something is the same thing as to say how it appears. But to adopt the present solution to the problem is to legitimize the use of ‘appearance’ as a concrete noun. The ease with which we shift from the abstract to the concrete use of a noun is undoubtedly one of the reasons why this solution seems so natural.

But it is not only natural. As far as the difficulty about appearances is concerned, it is effective. It has, furthermore, the additional advantage that it makes it easier to deal with hallucinations. If an appearance is an entity, we can speak of it in circumstances in which there is nothing which has the appearance. We feel there is no radical difference between the case where a ship appears small when it is not and the case where there appears to be a ship when there is none. On the entity view about appearances, no ingenuity is required to account for the latter kind of case.

It is not therefore surprising that this solution to the difficulty has dominated modern philosophy from Descartes to the phenomenalists. Descartes took it as axiomatic that appearances should be admitted to a mental-entity status as “ideas”. And what was done implicitly through the use of the term ‘idea’ has been done explicitly through the definition of the technical term ‘sense-datum’, which allows for these to be entities in their own right, and not necessarily mental ones at that.5

It should be observed that this solution does not dispense with the notion of appearing in the first sense which we considered, that in which it was a simple two-term relation between that which appears and the person to whom it appears. All that it does is to regard this relation as holding not between the person and the thing, but between the person and the so-

5See H. H. Price, op. cit., for a recent defence of this solution to the problem.
called "appearance"—the datum. In this way, it provides an analysis of the difficult notion of "appearing as" into a complex which includes the relatively harmless relation of "appearing" in the dyadic sense. The remainder of the analysis concerns the relation between sense-datum and thing and it is this part of it which has remained a matter of dispute between representationalists and phenomenalists.

It is not my purpose here to discuss this sense-datum type of theory. All I wish to do is to point to its primary role as a solution of the appearance problem. Unfortunately it solves this problem at considerable cost, and there are many who would reject it on various grounds. To say the least, sense-data are an odd sort of entity, and if we can do without them, so much the better. The question then is whether we can do without them.

This question is a crucial and a difficult one. Those who have rejected a sense-datum theory have in the main attempted to show that statements of the troublesome form ‘T appears A to P’ can be analysed into statements of the simple form ‘T appears to P’. The stumbling-block has of course been that when ‘appear’ is used in the simple dyadic sense, it does not make sense to speak of anything appearing other than it is. The task of those who have been generally classified as "direct realists" has been to get round this difficulty.6

Now it must be emphasized that in carrying out this task, such people have assumed that there is a difficulty to get round. It is of course precisely the difficulty which I have been trying to explain. They have realized that a consideration of the difficulty has led people into a sense-datum theory. They have challenged this theory on the ground that the difficulty can be overcome in another way, not on the ground that there is no difficulty to overcome.

It is most important that we should distinguish between these two different grounds of challenge. Ever since the publication of George Paul’s paper "Is there a Problem about Sense-data?"7 those who have denied there is a difficulty have in fact directed their fire against the sense-datum theory. This is no doubt because the analyses provided by the opponents of that theory give the impression of doing less violence to our ordinary talk about the perception of things. But this impression is false. The opponents of sense-data as well as their advocates have sought to rid themselves of appearance-expressions in which ‘appear’ is used in the problem-raising sense, and these expressions occur with great frequency in our talk about the perception of things. Hence if we are being exhorted not to worry, the exhortation should be directed equally to both parties.

III

Why then should we not worry?

6See e.g. D. M. Armstrong, Perception and the Physical World (London, 1961) for a recent attempt to do this.

I have admitted that the difficulty only arises if we accept a certain assumption—the assumption, namely, that a complete account of the world can be given in terms of entities, their properties and their relations. And the first thing which may be said is that this categorial scheme is unduly restrictive. Why not simply admit that in addition the world contains things-as-they-appear-to-people? Then we will have no need to invent far-fetched analyses of such familiar expressions as 'the stick appears bent to me'.

We are in trouble here, of course, about the kind of reasons which can be given for accepting or rejecting any given categorial scheme. There seems to me no doubt that for the ordinary reflective man, the thing-as-it-appears is metaphysically unacceptable. Anyone who now wishes to reinstate it is not returning to a satisfying naivety, as Austin suggests, but involving himself in a double sophistication. If we like we can say that he is engaging in a kind of revisionary metaphysics. This may be no objection to what he is doing, but it means it cannot be supported by any appeal to common sense.

This issue about categorial schemes obviously cannot be decided on empirical grounds. It makes no difference to what I can observe whether the stick appears bent to me or whether there appears before me something bent which (inaccurately) represents the stick. This leads those of a positivistic turn of mind to solve the problem by saying that there is no issue to be decided. The question whether the world contains things-as-they-appear is, in their quite technical sense, a metaphysical one—hence not a genuine question at all. To describe an appearance-situation in terms of sense-data—or any other proposed analysis—is on this view merely to introduce an alternative terminology. We have rules for the use of the phrase 'appear as', and devising a sense-datum (or a "direct realist") language is merely a matter of altering these rules. Some may object to this as a violation of the logic of our ordinary language—others may defend it as a more convenient way of talking about the empirical facts. But that is all.

There are elements of this way of handling the problem in the paper of Paul's to which I have referred. Talking of sense-data, he says, brings us "no nearer to reality" than any other way of expressing the same facts. And, if we stick to this in a strictly positivistic manner, there is indeed nothing more to be said.

As we know, Paul himself was not prepared to leave the matter in this way. Though he said that talking of sense-data was no better than talking of how things appear, the whole point of his paper was to suggest that it was worse. In this he is followed unequivocally by Austin. But Austin, for this very reason, refuses to accept the view that the issue is between two equivalent modes of expression. He realizes well enough that acceptance of this view, though it gives an impression of impartiality, is in fact used to

serve various, and even opposed, metaphysical purposes. Paul no doubt thought of the two modes of expression as two equivalent ways of talking about how things appear to us. But Ayer also regarded the distinction as a linguistic one and, as Austin insists in his polemic, Ayer seems really to think of them as two equivalent ways of talking about sense-data. In each case the metaphysical commitment reasserts itself, and in so far as it does this, the issue remains which commitment is the right one. Austin is concerned to reject commitment to sense-data, and since he pays no attention to alternative realistic views, he is presumably committing himself to the view that the world contains things-as-they-appear-to-people.

His readiness to do this and thereby to challenge the restrictive assumption is no doubt due to a general dislike of reductive analysis, a general disinclination, that is to say, to minimize differences or say of anything that it is after all only a case of something else. That things appear other than they are, it is felt, is a fact we must accept and if it does not fit into a scheme which includes only entities, properties and relations, so much the worse for that scheme.

In empirical matters, this attitude is undoubtedly to be applauded. If someone says a tiger is really only a cat, and neglects observable differences, he may get into trouble. And we may point out to him, as a second move, that quite apart from his own observations, he should have paid attention to the fact that our ordinary language includes the special word 'tiger'. This in itself should have suggested to him that there was a real difference of one kind or another.

In the present case, however, we cannot point to observable differences. Hence if we want to insist that there is a difference, we can only appeal to the second kind of consideration. We should pay attention to the fact, it will be said, that our ordinary language includes such phrases as 'appears bent'. If the world had been describable merely in terms of entities, properties and relations, there would have been no call for such phrases.

We here come down to the conviction that our language is in order as it is. As Austin insists in a Burke-like passage, our verbal institutions should only be tampered with with extreme caution; being the outcome of innumerable subtle adjustments they embody the wisdom of the ages.

The trouble about this appeal to verbal tradition is that it neglects the great variety of functions which our language performs. Let us admit that the language as it stands embodies a great deal of wisdom; it is nicely adjusted to bring about certain ends. But these ends are various, and when there are differences between modes of expression their function need by no means be to indicate differences in what is being referred to. It is very sensible, for example, to have in English the word 'bachelor' as well as the phrase 'unmarried man'. But the end here is economy; one word is

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6Austin, op. cit., pp. 59-61. The reference to Ayer is to The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge which Austin is criticizing in this passage.

10Sense and Sensibilia, p. 63.
better than two. And the fact that there are these two expressions in no way suggests that there are bachelors as well as unmarried men in the same way that there are tigers as well as cats.

Now one of the functions of language is undoubtedly to enable us to get on without raising too many awkward questions. And I have already suggested that the terminology of appearances fulfils this function admirably. Using phrases like 'the stick looks bent' involves us in recognizing a difference between how things look and how things are. But it simply evades the question what it is that we are describing when we describe how things look. And it certainly does not commit us to the view that in describing how things look we are describing some unique feature of the world which is different from any kind of entity or property or relation of entities.

The question therefore is still with us whether reduction is justified in this case. If we dismiss the appeal to differences in modes of expression, we are left with a very obvious reason in its favour, even though, as we must admit, it lands us in theoretical difficulties. This is that it is extremely difficult to understand what the new and autonomous category of appearances might be. If anyone mentions how things appear as part of their description of the world, we will inevitably find them asking about this precisely those questions which presuppose the old and more restrictive categorial scheme.

IV

The tenacity with which people have held on to this scheme is vividly brought out by the fact that, rather than abandon it, they have often been prepared to throw doubt on an assumption which is even more fundamental than the one I have been discussing. The assumption, as I have stated it, is that a complete account of the world can be given in terms of entities, their properties and their relations. If we can find no place for appearances in this account, there are two things we can do about it. The first is to say the assumption is unduly restrictive; this is the alternative I have so far been concerned with. But there is a second possibility. This is to accept the assumption as it stands and deny that we need find a place for appearances in a complete account of the world. For we must distinguish, it may be said, between appearance and reality. In describing the world we only describe what is, and not how it appears to any particular person. Hence things-as-they-appear, though they may be mentioned, cannot be said to exist, and so run us into no metaphysical difficulty whatever.

In the past, in fact, those who have claimed to evade the difficulty and have exhorted us not to worry have quite generally based their exhortation on this second ground. They have accepted our restricted categories as far as existence is concerned, and have accommodated everything else by relegating it to the realm of the apparent. This is the course taken, for example, by Plato, Kant, Bradley, Meinong and many others. We should not conclude without considering it.

It must be said at once that few have stated this second alternative in
such a downright fashion. Among those mentioned none except Meinong were prepared to deny outright that appearances exist. What they did in fact was to soften the blow by granting to appearances a lower level of existence. Hence the sensible, or shadow, world which Plato opposed to the real intelligible one, the phenomenal world which Kant opposed to the noumenal, and the various lower degrees of reality which Bradley granted to appearances insofar as they fell short of the Absolute.

To play fast and loose in this way with the notion of existence is hardly helpful. For it is extremely doubtful whether anyone has ever made clear what is meant by talking of different kinds or levels of existence or of reality. Different kinds of things exist, but what would it be for them to have different kinds of existence? It is part of our notion of existence that something either exists or it does not; shadow worlds of appearances are an unintelligible compromise.

Another way of softening the blow has been to turn the issue into a verbal one, and say that appearances exist in one sense of ‘exist’, but not in the same sense as real things do. This, however, is equally unhelpful. For though the words ‘exist’ and ‘real’ are used in many different senses, it is quite clear that in this context no variation in sense is intended. What is intended is that simple and elementary use of ‘exist’ which people have in mind when they say that existence is not a predicate. And the sense of ‘real’ which is intended is one in which it is equivalent to this. When Bradley, for example, said that appearances were not real, he must have meant, as Moore so mercilessly pointed out, that they did not exist; and when he also insisted that they did exist, he must have meant it in this same sense, thereby contradicting himself.

The question, therefore, whether appearances exist must be treated as a straight question which is unambiguous and demands the answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. If we are to avoid the problem by refusing to admit the way things appear to us as a feature of the world, we must do this without hedging. Admittedly there are still two alternative ways of doing it. There is the direct way, taken by Meinong, of simply denying that appearances exist—at least in so far as things appear other than they are. And there is the more sophisticated Strawsonian way of doing it which consists in saying that in the case of any statement about appearances the question of existence does not arise. But these views have it in common that they contradict a very basic assumption we are inclined to make, the assumption that the question does arise and is to be answered in the affirmative.

The view that the question does not arise can be made to look plausible by appealing to the recognized distinction between what is the case and

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11See, for example, R. Harré, “On the Structure of Existential Judgments”, this journal, 1965, pp. 43-52, for a recent statement of this kind of view about existence. Harré envisages different “ontological classes” determined by different criteria for the use of ‘exist’.

what appears to be the case. For, to repeat Austin's point, to discuss how the stick looks is to discuss a different issue from the one about what it is. This, of course, is true, but it is irrelevant. When we discuss how the stick looks, we assume we are discussing an issue about what is the case, even if it is not an issue about the actual qualities of the stick. The question is whether this assumption can be denied.

A possible ground for denying it is that in talking about appearances we automatically rule out all public criteria, and that there is therefore no conceivable issue to be discussed. An utterance such as 'The stick looks bent to me' could on this view be expressive of my state of mind, but it could not properly be said to be a statement about either an existent or a non-existent object, because there are no rules for testing it.

We are involved here in a large question about private languages and the status of "avowals". All I wish to say about it is that if anyone takes this way out he must be clear what he is doing. If anyone asks him whether it is the case that the stick looks bent to him or straight, he must refuse to answer and merely insist that the question is an improper one. This would be such a surprising thing to do that the grounds which justified it would have to be very good indeed.

If we drop this extreme measure, there remains the alternative of simply denying that there is anything to be experienced when things appear other than they are. We may say if we like, that there are objects which appear to us in the first and harmless sense of 'appear'. But, on this view, these objects are of two kinds—the existent and the non-existent. To say things appear other than they are is to say that the objects which appear to us do not exist, whereas to say things appear as they are is to say that the objects which appear to us do exist. This relieves us of any worry about things appearing other than they are.

I have mentioned Meinong as one who explicitly adopted this way of undermining the problem. The problem arises because we feel there must be something which appears before us when things appear other than they are. It seemed to the Cartesians that it could not be the actual things themselves, hence they had to introduce other actual entities—really existent ideas or sense-data—to fill the gap. But all this, it may be said, depends on our not realizing that things such as bent sticks can appear to us when they are not there. People have simply failed to see that objects of consciousness may not exist.

It is a point in favour of this line of thought that it can be applied to a whole set of parallel puzzles about the objects which we imagine, desire, look for, and so on. The problem about appearances, in fact, may be said to be merely part of a more general problem arising out of the intentional character of consciousness. And the solution to this general problem, it

13See the article entitled "Referring and Existing" by N. Wolterstorff, this journal, 1961, pp. 335-348, for its application to the notion of referring. Wolterstorff claims against both Russell and Strawson that it is perfectly reasonable to say we can refer to what does not exist—in fact, he suggests, we do so constantly.
may be said, lies simply in the admission of non-existent objects of various kinds.

It will be admitted, however, that there is about this solution an air of paradox. On the face of it, we are contradicting ourselves when we speak of things appearing to us when they are not there. The reason for this, of course, is that we regard appearing (in our first sense) as a relation, and it is entailed in the very notion of a relation that it must have at least two terms. This, in fact, is merely an application of our original rule against free-floating properties. Appearing to somebody is a relational property, and there can be no relational property, we say, which is not a property of something. Non-existent objects, therefore, turn out to involve us in a metaphysical oddity of exactly the same kind as things-as-they-appear. To admit them, we must challenge the categorial scheme of things, properties and relations.

It is no good, then, trying to prevent the breakdown of this categorial scheme by ruling out appearances from our account of the world. If we try we involve ourselves once again in the same breakdown. We involve ourselves in asserting that for psychological concepts like that of "appearing" the old framework of things and relations will not do.

I will not pursue this further. My purpose has been to make sure that those who refuse to recognize a problem about appearances are quite clear what the consequences are. This may well make them wonder whether the refusal is worth the price. For they have to accept a wholesale categorial revision, even the intelligibility of which is in doubt.

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