

## 14

*The Evidence of our Senses*

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## I

The modern causal theory of perception—the theory defended by Grice and Strawson—differs from the classical theory advanced by Descartes and Locke in two ways. First, the modern theory is an exercise in conceptual analysis. Secondly, it is a version of what is sometimes called direct realism. I shall comment on these points in turn.

First, in Grice's words, the modern causal theory is meant 'to elucidate or characterize the ordinary notion of perceiving a material object'.<sup>1</sup> So, on the one hand, its object is not to define a concept better suited to scientific enquiry than the familiar concept that we learn to use as children. On the contrary, its object is to elucidate or characterize that very concept. And, on the other hand, it is not sufficient, in order to count as accepting the causal theory in some form, merely to hold that the perception of a material object can always be causally explained in a way which involves the object perceived. The minimum claim made by the theory is (in Strawson's words this time) as follows:

(P1) It is a *conceptual* truth that when a subject S [perceives] an external object O, O is causally responsible for S's [perceptual] experience.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the modern theory's advocates are committed to the proposition that we perceive material objects immediately. The original, classical theory is generally thought to share a central doctrine with phenomenalism: namely, that the only immediate objects of perception are mental entities—thoughts

<sup>1</sup> H. P. Grice, 'The Causal Theory of Perception', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 35 (1961), 121–2.

<sup>2</sup> In fact these are not quite Strawson's words. I have substituted 'perceives' for 'sees' and 'perceptual' for 'visual' (P. F. Strawson, 'Reply to Paul Snowdon', in L. E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (Chicago and LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1998), 311.

or images or ideas. And, because of this doctrine, the classical theory is thought to imply that the existence of objects beyond the mind cannot be known, except perhaps as a result of making an inference from ideas or images that it is hard to justify. There has been a debate about whether this view of the classical theory is historically accurate. But, whatever the truth is about that, Grice's article 'The Causal Theory of Perception' convinced many philosophers that it is possible to formulate a version of the causal theory which discards this doctrine.

Grice argues that, if a person perceives a material object, the object is causally responsible for his having a sense-impression or sense-datum, or (in a more cautious form of words) for 'a state of affairs' that is reported by 'some present-tense sense-datum statement' about him.<sup>3</sup> But, instead of introducing the terms 'sense-impression' and 'sense-datum' as names of a kind of object that is present in the mind of a person who is perceiving something, Grice suggests that they be introduced contextually, by introducing (e.g.) the *sentence*, 'S has a sense-impression of O' as a paraphrase of some such sentence as 'It seems to S as if he can perceive O', adding, 'I shall myself . . . often for brevity's sake talk of sense-data or sense-impressions; but I shall hope that a more rigorous, if more cumbrous, mode of expression will always be readily available.'<sup>4</sup> He considers at length the objection that it is not true to say that it seems to S as if he can perceive O unless there is some reason for doubting whether S can perceive O; and, in a discussion whose ramifications extend far beyond the philosophy of perception, he rejects this objection, on the grounds that it confuses semantic and pragmatic aspects of the use of language.

The advantage of introducing the term 'sense-datum' or 'sense-impression' contextually is twofold. First, as Grice explains, it means that there is no need to prove 'the existence of objects of a special sort for which the term . . . is offered as a class-name'.<sup>5</sup> For the term is not introduced as the name of a special sort of object, but (roughly) as part of an abbreviation. Secondly, if a term is not the name of a special sort of object, *a fortiori* it is not the name of a mental object that represents or stands proxy for a material object. Hence, the minimum claim made by the causal theory can be combined with the proposition that we are immediately aware of material objects, rather than their mental proxies. As Strawson puts it:

we take ourselves to be immediately aware of real, enduring physical things in space . . . The immediacy which common sense attributes to perceptual awareness

<sup>3</sup> Grice, 'Causal Theory of Perception', 152.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 123-4. I shall follow Grice here, and assume that the free use he makes of the terms 'impression' and 'sense-impression' is acceptable.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 123.

is in no way inconsistent . . . with the causal dependence of [perceptual experience] on [the things we perceive].<sup>6</sup>

Now since the modern theory is not committed to the doctrine that the immediate objects of perception are mental entities, it is generally thought that it escapes the difficulty faced by the classical theory in explaining how the ordinary beliefs we acquire when we perceive objects can be justified. But I think this is a mistake. I think it faces the same difficulty, at least in respect of an important class of these ordinary beliefs, namely perceptual beliefs, such as my present belief that I can see a table in front of me. And I think it faces this difficulty precisely because it combines the two things I have mentioned: conceptual analysis and direct realism. The principal object of this chapter is to explain and defend this claim. In Sections II–V I shall argue that, if the minimal claim made by the modern causal theory is correct, a perceptual belief (such as my present belief that I can see a table in front of me) cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence. In Sections VI–VIII I shall argue that the modern causal theory cannot provide a satisfactory account of how such a judgement can be supported by evidence. In Section IX I shall argue that the theory is based on a false view about the nature of perceptual experience, and propose an alternative view, which does not appear to lead to the same difficulties. Finally, in Section X I shall comment briefly on the epistemology of sense perception. I should add that, like Grice and Strawson, I shall talk mainly about visual perception.

## II

The first question I want to consider is this:

(Q<sub>I</sub>) Does P<sub>I</sub> imply that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence?

By a perceptual belief I shall mean a belief that would be expressed by uttering a sentence whose main verb is a perceptual verb in the first person and the present tense: for example, ‘I see a table in front of me’, or ‘I can see a table in front of me’.

Before I address Q<sub>I</sub> I want to make four preliminary points. First, a terminological point. The term ‘perceptual belief’ and similar terms have been used in various different ways. For example, Strawson calls his belief that *he perceives* a table in front of him an ‘M-perception-belief’, whereas Grice calls his belief that *there is* a table in front of him a ‘perceptual belief’.

<sup>6</sup> P. F. Strawson, ‘Perception and its Objects’, in G. F. Macdonald (ed.), *Perception and Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 53.

This belief is supposed to be the *result* of a perception; but it is not *about* a perception. The point that I wish to draw attention to is that, in the sense in which I have defined the term, my present belief that there is a table in front of me is *not* a perceptual belief. My use of the term 'perceptual belief' is like Strawson's use of the term 'M-perception-belief', but it is unlike Grice's use of the term 'perceptual belief'. And my topic is the justification of perceptual beliefs, in this restricted sense. It is not the justification of all of the beliefs that perceptions lead us to acquire.

Secondly, a point about the interpretation of P<sub>I</sub>. When *S* perceives *O*, *S*'s perceptual experience is a perception of *O*. Hence, P<sub>I</sub> says that it is a conceptual truth that when *S* perceives *O*, *O* is causally responsible for *S*'s perception of *O*. Now P<sub>I</sub> is Strawson's formulation of the modern causal theory's minimum claim. And, as we have seen, Grice holds that it is a conceptual truth that when *S* perceives *O*, *O* is causally responsible for *S*'s *impression* of *O*. So, what is the relationship between these two doctrines?

The simplest answer is that they are equivalent, because it is a conceptual truth that a perception of *O* is an impression. It is, to be sure, an impression of a particular kind; namely, one that was caused (in the right sort of way) by *O*. But, since a perception of *O* is an impression, when *S* perceives *O*, *S*'s perception of *O* and *S*'s impression are one and the same experience.

This simple answer is suggested by several passages in Strawson's writings. For example, in 'Causation in Perception' Strawson remarks that only those impressions that are in a certain sense dependable 'are to count as the [perceptions] they seem to be'.<sup>7</sup> And this clearly implies that some impressions count as perceptions, i.e. that some impressions *are* perceptions. (Of course it transpires that an impression is a perception of *O* only if it was caused by *O*.<sup>8</sup>)

I shall discuss the claim that a perception is a kind of impression towards the end of this chapter. As we shall see, there are grave objections to it; and

<sup>7</sup> Strawson, 'Causation in Perception', in *Freedom and Resentment and other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 71. I shall discuss this remark and the passage in which it occurs in detail towards the end of this chapter.

<sup>8</sup> In his later article 'Perception and its Objects' Strawson expounds the modern causal theory's minimum claim as follows: 'The thought of my fleeting perception as a *perception* of a continuously and independently existing thing implicitly contains the thought that if the thing had not been there, I should not even have *seemed* to perceive it. It really should be obvious that with the distinction between independently existing objects and perceptual awareness of objects we already have the general notion of causal dependence of the latter on the former' (51). The first sentence is obviously meant to impress upon the reader that if *S* believes that he can see *O*, *S* believes implicitly that his *impression* was caused by *O*: had the thing not been there, *S* would not even have *seemed* to perceive it. But in the second sentence Strawson insists that if *S* perceives *O* his *perceptual awareness* of *O* is causally dependent on *O*. And by 'perceptual awareness' Strawson presumably means perception. Hence, a plausible interpretation of the passage, which comfortably avoids the charge of *non sequitur*, will depend on the thought which was expressed explicitly in the earlier passage, that some impressions 'count as the perceptions they seem to be'.

Strawson has recently attempted to defend the causal theory without assuming that it is true. So, in the meantime, I shall interpret P<sub>I</sub> as saying *only* that when *S* perceives *O*, *O* is causally responsible for *S*'s perception of *O*. This is consistent with holding that when *S* perceives *O*, *S*'s perception is an impression, and hence *O* is causally responsible for *S*'s impression. But it does not imply it.

The third point is that neither Grice nor Strawson addresses Q<sub>I</sub>. But they could accept an affirmative answer to Q<sub>I</sub> without discomfort, because they both hold that our impressions provide the evidence that supports our ordinary perceptual beliefs, and makes them reasonable. So, for example, my present belief that I can see a table in front of me is reasonable because it seems to me as if I can see a table in front of me. They deny that an ordinary perceptual belief is the result of making an inference, or of what Grice calls a 'passage of thought'.<sup>9</sup> And they deny that we postulate material objects, in order to explain the occurrence of our impressions—because we do not *postulate* what we perceive *immediately*. But Grice says that in ordinary circumstances *S* accepts the existence of *O* 'on the evidence of certain sense-impressions', and presumably he holds that *S* believes that he perceives *O* on the same evidence.<sup>10</sup> For his part, Strawson says that an impression 'presumptively makes reasonable' the corresponding perceptual belief, which is presumably the same thing as providing the evidence needed to support it.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the doctrine that our impressions provide the evidence that makes our ordinary perceptual beliefs reasonable is consistent both with Grice's denial that perceptual beliefs result from inferences, and with Strawson's vigorous criticism of the doctrine that we postulate objects in order to explain impressions, as the following analogy confirms. Suppose I believe that a friend intends to take a holiday in France next year. If I believe this because, and only because, he told me so, then my *evidence* consists in the fact that he told me so, and my belief depends upon this evidence. But it does not follow that I *inferred* from his telling me so that he intends to take a holiday in France next year, or that I attributed the intention to him in order to explain his utterance. The doctrine that intentions are states of mind that we postulate in order to explain behaviour is a popular one. But it does not follow simply from the fact that the evidence for a person's state of mind lies in his saying and doing things.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase 'passage of thought, or inferential passage' occurs in H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), but I am unable to give a page reference.

<sup>10</sup> Grice, 'Causal Theory of Perception', 150.

<sup>11</sup> Strawson, 'Causation in Perception', 68. Strawson also holds that *S*'s having an impression of *O* 'presumptively makes reasonable' *S*'s belief that *O* exists. For example, if it sensibly seems to *S* just as if he were seeing a book on a desk in front of him, the occurrence of this experience presumptively makes reasonable *S*'s belief that there is a book on a desk in front of him. (Both the terminology and the example are Strawson's own: *ibid.* 68.)

## III

Now for Q<sub>I</sub>. I believe that P<sub>I</sub> *does* imply that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence. The argument is as follows.

P<sub>I</sub> implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly a causal belief. Specifically, it implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly about the cause of an experience. By this I do not mean merely that P<sub>I</sub> implies (for example) that I can see a table in front of me *only if* a table in front of me is causally responsible for my visual experience, although of course this is true. When I say that P<sub>I</sub> implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly a causal belief, I mean that it implies that a perceptual belief *is* a causal belief; specifically, that it *is* a belief about the cause of an experience. The word ‘implicitly’ is only there to signal the fact that a cursory look at the sentence used to express a perceptual belief may not disclose this fact. It may not be obvious until the content of the belief, or the meaning of the sentence used to express it, has been explained correctly.

A couple of comparisons may help to make this clear. If I believe that *P*, where *P* is the conjunction of Euclid’s axioms, I do not believe implicitly that *Q*, where *Q* is Pythagoras’s theorem, although of course *P* implies *Q*. But if I believe that Candy spilt her milk, I do believe implicitly that Candy caused her milk to spill, and this will be obvious if the content of my belief, or the meaning of the sentence ‘Candy spilt her milk’, is explained correctly. If P<sub>I</sub> is true, my belief that I can see a table in front of me is like my belief that Candy spilt her milk. Neither the word ‘cause’ nor any other word that has a similar meaning needs to occur in a sentence that is used to express one of these beliefs. But when these sentences are fully understood, or when the content of each belief has been spelled out correctly, it will be obvious that they are both causal beliefs.

Strawson claims more than this. He writes as follows:

this notion of the causal dependence of the experience enjoyed in sense-perception on features of the spatio-temporal world . . . is not something we discover with the advance of science, or even by refined common observation. Neither does it require any refined philosophical argument. It is conceptually inherent in a gross and obvious way in the very notion of sense perception as yielding true judgments about an objective spatio-temporal world.<sup>12</sup>

I shall be more cautious. Perhaps the concept of causation is inherent in a gross and obvious way in the belief that Candy spilt her milk. But what is obvious to some is unobvious to others, and, if P<sub>I</sub> is true, my belief that I can see a table in front of me may be a case in point.

<sup>12</sup> *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 61.

*The Evidence of our Senses*

241

Be that as it may, P<sub>1</sub> implies that a perceptual belief is—in the sense explained—implicitly a causal belief. Conceptual inherence, whether or not it is gross and obvious, is not just a matter of implication. It is not even just a matter of entailment, although we may miss the difference if the word ‘inherent’ reminds us of the idea that the conclusion of a valid argument is ‘contained’ in the premisses, and if we lazily accept this idea.<sup>13</sup> If P<sub>1</sub> is true, a perceptual belief just *is* a causal belief. For example, my belief that I can see a table in front of me just *is* the belief that a table in front of me is causally responsible (in a special sort of way that is still obscure) for my current visual experience.<sup>14</sup>

## IV

Now, depending on one’s views about causation, one may think that for this reason alone it follows from P<sub>1</sub> that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence—because one may think that *every* causal belief needs the support of evidence, in order to be reasonable. Certainly, Hume, Mill, Russell in 1914, and Wittgenstein in 1933 all held that view. But one may hold, on the contrary, that

(P2) Causation is directly observable in the particular case;

and

(P3) What is directly observed is believed without evidence.

Strawson holds that P<sub>2</sub> is true. He writes as follows:

there is an enormous variety . . . of kinds of *action* and *transaction* which are directly observable in the particular case and which are properly to be described

<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of containment is in any case a seriously misleading one—except perhaps for syllogistic logic, where there are effective decision procedures for validity. (See P. Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 79–80.)

<sup>14</sup> The parenthetical phrase is there because neither Grice nor Strawson holds that if *O* is causally responsible for *S*’s perceptual experience then *S* perceives *O*, because they disagree on the right way to state necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of the proposition that *S* sees *O*, and because no consensus has been reached by philosophers who accept the theory on this question.

The main point stated in this paragraph, namely that if P<sub>1</sub> is true, a perceptual belief just is a causal belief, needs to be underlined for the following reason. I shall argue that since P<sub>1</sub> implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly a causal belief, it also implies that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence, because (except in the case where causation is directly observed) causal beliefs need to be supported by evidence in order to be reasonable. But if P<sub>1</sub> only implied that the proposition that *S* perceives *O* entails that *O* is causally responsible for *S*’s perception, this argument would be obviously fallacious. For it would be absurd to maintain that if *P* entails *Q*, and *Q* is implausible without evidence, it follows that *P* is also implausible without evidence. For example, it would be absurd to maintain that if a theorem follows from some axioms and the theorem is implausible unless it is supported by evidence, the same must be true of the axioms.

as causal in so far as they are varieties of *bringing something about*, of producing some effect or some new state of affairs.<sup>15</sup>

For example, one can directly observe a boulder flattening a hut, or a man lifting a suitcase on to a rack. As we have seen, Grice and Strawson do not hold that P<sub>3</sub> is true.<sup>16</sup> But Kenny, for example, does:

A proposition may itself be evident [he writes], or it may be something for which other propositions provide evidence. Propositions which are themselves evident may either be self-evident (as that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ) or be evident to the senses (as that it is snowing as I write this) . . . Things which are evident may be said to be believed without evidence. Certainly there is no other proposition put forward as evidence for them.<sup>17</sup>

Kenny does not say explicitly that his belief that it is snowing is *reasonable*, but this is certainly his view. In fact the passage is part of a classification of rational beliefs.

If the views expressed in *both* of these passages are correct, P<sub>1</sub> *may* be consistent with the view that a perceptual belief can be reasonable without being supported by evidence. Because it may be possible to hold, first, that (for example) the production of my visual experience of a table in front of me is one of the 'enormous variety . . . of kinds of action and transaction which are *directly observable* in the particular case' by me; and hence, secondly, that my belief that a table in front of me is causally responsible for my visual experience is *not* supported by evidence, and does not need to be.

## V

So the next question is this:

(Q<sub>2</sub>) Can I directly observe the production of my perceptual experience?

For example, if there is a table in front of me, and I can see it, can I *also* see its production of my visual experience? If the answer to Q<sub>2</sub> is no, then the answer to Q<sub>1</sub> is yes.

Two arguments may be thought to show that the answer to Q<sub>2</sub> *is* no, at least in the case of visual experiences. I shall not consider whether these arguments apply in the case of every other sense.

First, plausible examples of directly observable causation, such as the boulder flattening the hut, are unlike the production of a visual experience in two relevant ways. First, flattening—along with lifting, breaking, pulling, pushing, etc.—is one of the many basic sorts of mechanical transaction on which the concept of a cause is founded, whereas the production of a visual

<sup>15</sup> Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> See above p. 000 and n. 11.

<sup>17</sup> A. J. P. Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 10.



*The Evidence of our Senses*

243

experience is not. Secondly, a boulder's flattening a hut does not look like action at a distance, whereas the production of a visual experience presumably would. Hence, it isn't plausible to hold that I can directly observe the production of my visual experience.

This argument is not inept, but it is not conclusive, because there may be causal transactions that are directly observable, but that differ from a boulder's flattening a hut in both of these respects. For example, perhaps I can *directly observe* a sudden noise startle someone, although making someone start is not a mechanical transaction like a push or a pull; and the question of whether the noise and its effect are or appear to be contiguous does not have a straightforward answer, if it has an answer at all.

The second argument is that visible objects do not generally *look* as if they are producing our visual experiences; and so we cannot generally *see* that they do. Sometimes visible objects look active and sometimes they look inert. It simply isn't plausible to maintain that they never look inert because they always look as if they are acting on our senses.

There is a reply to this argument, but I do not think it succeeds. The reply is similar to something Wittgenstein is supposed to have said to Elizabeth Anscombe. Apparently, Anscombe remarked that it wasn't surprising that people used to believe the sun goes round the earth, because that is how it *looks*. And apparently Wittgenstein asked in reply: 'How would it look if it looked as if the earth goes round the sun?' So perhaps someone who believed that visible objects *do* look as if they're producing our visual experiences could challenge someone who denied this to say how he thinks visible objects would look if they *did* look as if they were producing our visual experiences.

The remark attributed to Wittgenstein here is on target, but the parallel does not succeed, because the point of the remark is that the sun would look the same either way. But if visible objects would look the same whether they looked as if they were producing our visual experiences or not, then we could not *see* that they were producing our visual experiences. It follows that the answer to Q<sub>2</sub> is negative: at least in the visual case, I cannot observe the production of my perceptual experience. And hence the answer to Q<sub>1</sub> is affirmative: at least in the visual case, P<sub>1</sub> *does* imply that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence.<sup>18</sup>

## VI

There is another route to the same conclusion. For, if P<sub>1</sub> is true, the proposition that S's belief that he can see O does *not* depend on evidence entails a regress.

<sup>18</sup> I shall not add the qualification 'at least in the visual case' again. The reader is invited to add it where appropriate.

There are two preliminary points that need to be borne in mind. First, as we have seen,  $P_1$  implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly a causal belief. For example, if  $S$  believes that he can see  $O$ , he believes implicitly that  $O$  is causally responsible for his visual experience. For the most part, Grice and Strawson restrict their discussion to the perception of bodies. But—this is the first point—if this is true of beliefs about bodies it must also be true of beliefs about events and actions. For one does not use the verb ‘see’ equivocally if one says, ‘I believe I can see a man; now I can see the expression on his face changing; and now I can see him opening the door and leaving the room.’

Secondly, the idea we are considering is that  $S$ ’s belief that  $O$  is causally responsible for his visual experience does not need to be supported by evidence in order to be reasonable, because the production of  $S$ ’s experience is one of the ‘enormous variety . . . of kinds of action and transaction which are directly observable in the particular case’ by  $S$ . But what exactly is involved in the thought that  $S$  *observes* the production of his experience?

Clearly, more must be involved in this thought than that  $S$  *perceives* the production of his experience. If  $S$  perceives the production of his experience, but does not realize that this is what he is perceiving, then we should not be willing to say that  $S$ ’s belief that his experience was produced by  $O$  does not need the support of any evidence in order to be reasonable because he *observed* the production of his experience.<sup>19</sup>

Compare the following case. Suppose I believe that Candy spilt her milk at breakfast this morning. My belief may be reasonable, without being supported by any evidence, if spilling milk is one of the ‘enormous variety . . . of kinds of action and transaction . . . etc.’, and if I observed the act. But not if I saw her spill it but failed to realize that this is what she was spilling. If I saw Candy spill her milk but did not believe that it was milk I saw her spill (e.g. because I thought that it was paint), the fact that I saw it happen cannot make my belief a reasonable one.

So, if  $S$ ’s belief that  $O$  is responsible for his experience does not need to be supported by evidence in order to be reasonable because  $S$  *observes* the production of his experience, then observation (in the relevant sense) has to imply belief: i.e. if  $S$  *observes* the production of his experience then  $S$  *believes* that he perceives the production of his experience. That is the second point.

If these two points are accepted, the regress can be simply demonstrated. Thus, suppose  $S$  believes that he can see  $O$ . If  $P_1$  is true, it follows that  $S$  believes implicitly that  $O$  is causally responsible for his visual experience. Let us call this experience  $E$ .

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Grice, ‘Causal Theory of Perception’, 147.

*The Evidence of our Senses*

245

Suppose now that *S*'s belief that *O* is responsible for *E* does not depend on evidence, because *S* observes the production of *E*. It follows (given the second point above) that *S* believes that he perceives the production of *E*. And, if *P<sub>I</sub>* is true, it also follows (given the first point above) that *S* believes implicitly that the production of *E* is causally responsible for his perception of the production of *E*. Suppose now that *this* belief does not depend on evidence, because *S* observes the production of his perception of the production of *E*. It follows (given the second point above) that *S* believes that he perceives the production of his perception of the production of *E*. And, if *P<sub>I</sub>* is true, it also follows (given the first point above) that *S* believes that the production of his perception of the production of *E* is causally responsible for his perception of the production of his perception of the production of *E*.

Obviously, the same step can be repeated indefinitely. If it is conceded at any point that *S*'s belief *does* depend on evidence, then it must be conceded that his original belief, i.e. his belief that he can see *O*, depends on the same evidence. But the result of repeatedly refusing to make the concession is absurd. For it could not be seriously maintained that, in ordinary circumstances, when *S* believes that he can see *O*, he also believes that the production of his perception of the production of his perception . . . (*ad infinitum*) of *E* is causally responsible for his perception of the production of his perception . . . (*ad infinitum*) of *E*. Indeed, it could not be seriously maintained that, in ordinary circumstances, when *S does* see *O*, and is aware of doing so, the production of his perception of the production of his perception . . . (*ad infinitum*) of *E* is causally responsible for his perception of the production of his perception . . . (*ad infinitum*) of *E*, regardless of what *S* believes about the matter.

## VII

For the reasons set out in the last three sections the answer to *Q<sub>I</sub>* is affirmative. Hence, Grice and Strawson are bound to hold that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence. And, as we have seen, they do hold this. They hold that ordinary perceptual beliefs are supported by the evidence provided by impressions. For example, my present belief that I can see a table in front of me is reasonable because it seems to me as if I can see a table in front of me. So the next question is this:

(Q<sub>3</sub>) How can an impression make the corresponding perceptual belief reasonable?

What sort of evidence can it provide?

It cannot generally be inductive evidence.<sup>20</sup> There may be circumstances in which the occurrence of an impression of a table could provide me with inductive evidence that I am actually seeing a table in front of me. For example, if I suffered from a severe agnosia, and found it impossible to recognize many things by sight, I might discover that tables are among the things which I *am* able to recognize, by confirming—e.g. by testimony or by touch—that when it seems to me as if I can see a table in front of me that is usually what I am seeing. If this happened, the fact that it seemed to me as if I could see a table in front of me could be a good inductive reason for me to believe that I *was* seeing a table in front of me. But the example shows why the evidence which makes our perceptual beliefs reasonable cannot *in general* be provided by impressions. For, if it were, nothing could play the role that touch or testimony plays in the example. In other words, having an impression of a kind of object could not be correlated with having a perception of that kind of object, because the perceptions could not be identified until the correlation had been established. Hence, the kinds of premisses on which inductive arguments depend would never be available.

So the evidence provided by impressions for the truth of our perceptual beliefs cannot generally be inductive evidence. But it cannot generally be theoretical evidence either, if the modern causal theory is right in holding that we perceive material objects *immediately*. The doctrine that our ordinary perceptual beliefs are supported by *theoretical* evidence is consistent with the classical version of the causal theory, because proponents of classical theory can hold that our ordinary perceptual beliefs embody a conception of the physical world that (as Ayer puts it) '[has the character of] a theory with respect to the immediate data of perception';<sup>21</sup> or (as Quine puts it) that 'our talk of external things . . . is just a conceptual apparatus that helps us to foresee and control the triggering of our sensory receptors'.<sup>22</sup> But this is the principal point that distinguishes the modern theory from the classical one. Hence, proponents of the modern causal theory are bound to reject the view that the evidence provided by impressions for the truth of our perceptual beliefs is theoretical evidence. And so they do. Grice, for example, dismisses it in a parenthesis. If the inductive model is rejected, he writes,

recourse may be had to an assimilation of material objects to such entities as electrons, the acceptability of which is regarded as being (roughly) a matter of their utility for the purposes of explanation and prediction; but this assimilation is repugnant for the reason that material objects, after having been first contrasted,

<sup>20</sup> My use of the phrase 'inductive evidence' is not meant to imply that a premiss of a deductively valid argument cannot also be a premiss of an invalid but inductively strong one.

<sup>21</sup> A. J. Ayer, 'Replies', in Macdonald (ed.), *Perception and Identity*, 289.

<sup>22</sup> W. V. Quine, 'Things and their Place in Theories', in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.

*The Evidence of our Senses*

247

as a paradigm case of uninvented entities, with the theoretical constructs or *entia rationis* of the scientist, are then treated as being themselves *entia rationis*.<sup>23</sup>

So, what sort of evidence *can* it be? Grice and Strawson give very similar answers to this question, and I shall only comment on Strawson's answer.

## VIII

Strawson claims that 'a certain relation weaker than entailment', which he calls 'presumptive implication', holds between (a) the proposition that it seems to *S* as if he can see a table in front of him and (b) the proposition that *S* can see a table in front of him; and of course (b) is supposed to entail (c) that *S*'s impression is caused by a table in front of him.<sup>24</sup> Strawson explains that '*p* presumptively implies *q*' is to be read 'if *p* is true, then *normally or generally q* is also true'.<sup>25</sup> Hence, his claim is that if (a) is true, then *normally or generally* (b) and hence (c) are also true.

In essence, the proposal is that *S*'s impression of a table in front of him can make his belief that he sees a table in front of him reasonable, because

(P<sub>4</sub>) It seems to *S* as if he perceives  $O \in S$  perceives  $O$ .

('p  $\in$  q' is to be read: 'If *p* then normally or generally *q*'.) But does this proposal provide a satisfactory answer to Q<sub>3</sub>?

I do not believe that it does. In the first place, a satisfactory answer to Q<sub>3</sub> will explain how an impression provides non-inductive and non-theoretical evidence that the corresponding perceptual belief is true, and so makes it reasonable. But, if one proposition presumptively implies another, it does not follow that the evidence provided by the first proposition is neither inductive nor theoretical evidence. For example, if someone drinks a pint of gin in the space of five minutes, then *normally or generally* he will shortly become unconscious. But the fact that someone has just drunk a pint of gin does not provide non-inductive and non-theoretical evidence that he will shortly become unconscious. Hence, the claim that (a) presumptively implies (b) does not provide a satisfactory answer to Q<sub>3</sub>.

This objection can be met quite easily, by claiming that the presumptive implication from (a) to (b) is *non-contingent*. In other words, P<sub>4</sub> can be modified to read as follows:

(P<sub>5</sub>)  $\boxtimes$  (It seems to *S* as if he perceives  $O \in S$  perceives  $O$ .)

<sup>23</sup> Grice, 'Causal Theory of Perception', 149–50. Grice seems to imply that unobservable entities such as electrons are postulated for convenience—to smooth the laws of physics, in Quine's phrase—with no pretence that they are real. But the point that our impressions cannot generally provide theoretical evidence for our perceptual beliefs if we perceive material objects immediately is independent of this doctrine.

<sup>24</sup> Strawson, 'Causation in Perception', 67.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 67.

( $\boxtimes(p)$ ) is to be read: 'It is a non-contingent truth that  $p$ .' As a matter of fact, I am fairly sure that this is what Strawson intended. A parenthetical comment hints at it. And Grice claims explicitly that the connection between an impression of something red and the presence of something red is 'a non-contingent connection'.<sup>26</sup> So this is probably a clarification rather than a modification of the proposal. And, if P<sub>5</sub> is true, then  $S$ 's impression evidently *can* provide  $S$  with non-inductive and non-theoretical evidence that he sees a table in front of him.

The second objection is that P<sub>5</sub> is false. It could only be a *contingent* truth that, if it seems to  $S$  as if he perceives  $O$ , then normally or generally  $S$  does perceive  $O$ , since it is possible that  $S$  recently became addicted to LSD or that his visual cortex recently went haywire for some other reason.

But this objection can also be met quite easily, by modifying P<sub>5</sub> to read as follows:

(P<sub>6</sub>) If  $S$  has normal sight (or hearing, etc.) and circumstances are normal, then  $\boxtimes$  (it seems to  $S$  as if he perceives  $O \in S$  perceives  $O$ ).

The third and final objection is that P<sub>6</sub> is also false. Indeed, I think it will be obvious that P<sub>6</sub> is false if we compare it with P<sub>7</sub>:

(P<sub>7</sub>)  $\boxtimes$  (If  $S$  has normal sight (or hearing, etc.) and circumstances are normal then (it seems to  $S$  as if he perceives  $O \in S$  perceives  $O$ )).

(P<sub>6</sub>) implies that in normal circumstances a normally sighted person's impression provides him with non-inductive and non-theoretical evidence for the truth of a perceptual belief, but (P<sub>7</sub>) doesn't imply this. But whereas (P<sub>7</sub>) is true—since this is what makes a person's sight or a set of circumstances qualify as normal—(P<sub>6</sub>) is false. Compare P<sub>8</sub>, which is false, and P<sub>9</sub>, which is true:

(P<sub>8</sub>) If there are nine planets then  $\boxtimes$  (there are more than seven planets).

(P<sub>9</sub>)  $\boxtimes$  (If there are nine planets then there are more than seven planets.)

I do not see how this objection can be met. And if it cannot be met then the thought that the notion of presumptive implication can provide an answer to Q<sub>3</sub> ultimately depends upon a well-known modal fallacy. (It has been known at least since Boethius.) And if there *isn't* a plausible answer to Q<sub>3</sub> it follows that the modern theory cannot avoid the principal difficulty faced by the classical theory, because it cannot explain how our ordinary perceptual beliefs can be justified.

Now, as I said that it would be, towards the beginning of this chapter, my topic has been the justification of perceptual beliefs; that is, beliefs that

<sup>26</sup> Grice, 'Causal Theory of Perception', 151.

would be expressed by uttering a sentence whose main verb is a perceptual verb in the first person and the present tense—my present belief that I can see a table in front of me, for example. But could an advocate of the causal theory seize the chance to cut his losses here? Could he concede that my belief that I can see a table in front of me cannot be justified, while insisting that my belief that there *is* a table in front of me is unaffected by this argument, since it is not a causal belief?

I doubt it. If my belief that I can see a table in front of me is unreasonable, it does not follow that the same is true of my belief that there *is* a table in front of me, for an eye-witness can have independent grounds for accepting the presence of an object that he believes he can see. But if I have *no* independent grounds for believing that there is a table in front of me, then either both of these beliefs are reasonable or neither is. Besides, drawing this division between the two beliefs is not a remedy that will save the causal theory, since a theory of perception that implies that our ordinary perceptual beliefs are uniformly unjustified must be untenable, regardless of whether it entails a more extensive scepticism.

## IX

The final question I want to consider is this:

(Q<sub>4</sub>) What reason is there to hold that P<sub>I</sub> is true?

But first I shall briefly recapitulate.

The minimum claim made by the modern causal theory is this:

(P<sub>I</sub>) It is a conceptual truth that when a subject *S* perceives an external object *O*, *O* is causally responsible for *S*'s perceptual experience.

Hence, the theory implies that a perceptual belief is implicitly a belief about the source or cause of a perceptual experience. It follows that the theory also implies that a perceptual belief cannot be reasonable unless it is supported by evidence of an appropriate sort. This would follow immediately if *every* reasonable causal belief must be supported by evidence. But even if this is false, because causation is sometimes directly observable in the particular case, it still follows, because we do not directly observe the production of our perceptual experiences. Latter-day proponents of the *classical* causal theory have argued that the evidence that supports our ordinary perceptual beliefs is theoretical evidence, because postulating bodies is the best way of explaining the occurrence of our impressions. But the modern theory is opposed to this view, as it is to any view that denies 'the immediacy that common sense attributes to perceptual awareness', and so it cannot have recourse to this solution. And that leaves it with no room for manoeuvre—unless, as Descartes believed, it is possible to devise an a priori proof of God's existence and benevolence.

So, what reason is there to hold that P<sub>1</sub> is true? Strawson argues for P<sub>1</sub> in several places, and a thorough answer to Q<sub>4</sub> would look at every argument in turn. I shall not do that. But I shall comment on the most recent (1998) and the earliest (1974) texts. It is a relatively straightforward matter to apply the comments I shall make about these passages to the other ones.

Here is the 1998 passage:

in order for an experience to amount to a genuine perception of an object (and hence a way of gaining knowledge about it) there must be such a relation between object and experience as to rule out the case of a subject's being merely flukishly or accidentally right in taking it that there is just the object before him that he takes himself to be perceiving . . . the relation of causal dependence . . . remains the only plausible candidate.<sup>27</sup>

And here is the 1974 passage:

The concept of perception is too closely linked to that of knowledge for us to tolerate the idea of someone's being merely flukishly right in taking his M-experience [sc. impression] to be the M-perception that it seems to be. Only those M-experiences which are in a certain sense dependable are to count as the M-perceptions they seem to be; and dependability in this sense entails dependence, causal . . . dependence on appropriate M-facts.<sup>28</sup>

These two passages are similar, but not as similar as they may look at first glance, and I shall comment on them separately, starting with the 1998 one.

My objection to the argument in this passage is that what the first part says is false. It is true that the senses are cognitive faculties, i.e. capacities for acquiring knowledge; but it does not follow that in order for an experience to amount to a genuine perception of an object it has to be related to the object in a way that prevents the subject's belief from being merely flukishly right. And in fact this is false. The argument is simple. If it were true, then every perception would be related in the fluke-excluding way to the object that it is a perception of; and hence a subject could *never* be merely flukishly right in taking it that there was just the object before him that he took himself to be perceiving. But this is false. For example, if I did not know that the famous sprinter Sally Fleetfoot has an identical twin sister who is also a sprinter, I could quite easily take myself to be seeing Sally Fleetfoot before me, at a race somewhere, and be flukishly or accidentally right. (The literature on the Gettier problem contains many examples that prove the same thing, i.e. that one *can* be merely flukishly right in taking it that there is just the object before one that one takes oneself to be perceiving: for instance, Goldman's well-known story about papier mâché barn façades.<sup>29</sup>)

<sup>27</sup> Strawson, 'Reply to Paul Snowdon', 314.

<sup>28</sup> Strawson, 'Causation in Perception', 71.

<sup>29</sup> A. I. Goldman, 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1976), 771-91.



The argument in the 1974 passage is more interesting, for two reasons. First, the flaw in the argument is less obvious. Secondly, the argument reveals more about the relationship between the modern causal theory and the classical causal theory advanced by Locke.

My objection to this argument is that it involves an assumption which is false; namely:

(P10) A perception is a kind of impression.

(viz., one that is the perception that it seems to be). The assumption is important, because, if we accept that it is true, then we shall naturally want to ask what kind of impression *is* the perception that it seems to be. And since a perception does not carry a hallmark of veracity, the answer will be bound to refer to a *relation* in which an impression can (but need not) stand to something else—presumably the object of which it seems to be a perception. And this takes us a good part of the way towards P1. In fact the only step which remains is to claim that ‘the relation of causal dependence [is] . . . the only plausible candidate’.

There are two principal reasons for denying that a perception is a kind of impression. First, a subject may (for example) see something without its seeming to him as if he can see anything, either because he is asleep or because the perception is subliminal. The literature is well known, and the examples are legion. But if one can have a perception without having an impression, a perception cannot be a kind of impression.

Secondly, the term ‘S’s impression of O’ was introduced as an abbreviation of the term ‘its seeming to S as if he perceives O’. (It was precisely by introducing the term in this way that P1 was shown to be consistent with direct realism.) But it involves a basic grammatical muddle to suppose that its seeming to S as if he perceives O *seems to S to be* a perception of O. The reason is this.

The term ‘its seeming to S as if he perceives O’ is a nominalization of the sentence ‘It seems to S as if he perceives O’. The nominalization is produced by a perfectly standard transformation; namely, by replacing the main verb of the sentence with a gerund and putting the subject in the genitive case—even if it is a so-called prop subject, as it is in ‘It seems to S as if he perceives O’. ‘It is warm in Aberdeen’ yields ‘its being warm in Aberdeen’ in the same way. (The ‘it’ is a prop subject in this sentence too.) And ‘Brutus killed Caesar’ yields the so-called imperfect nominal ‘Brutus’s killing Caesar’ and, with the insertion of the word ‘of’, the so-called perfect nominal ‘Brutus’s killing of Caesar’.

Now the nominal ‘its being warm in Aberdeen’ does not designate a thing that is warm and ‘Brutus’s killing of Caesar’ does not designate a thing or person that killed Caesar. If we imagine that it does, we are probably confusing it with the definite description ‘the *x* such that *x* killed Caesar’. But

there is no more truth in the idea that its seeming to *S* as if he perceives *O* is a thing that seems, than there is in the idea that its being warm in Aberdeen is a thing that is warm or that Brutus's killing of Caesar is a thing that kills. Hence, *S*'s impression does not *seem* to be a perception. It is a *seeming*, not a thing that seems.

If impressions were experiences that seem to be perceptions, it would be plausible to hold (as Strawson did in 1974) that some impressions do not merely seem to be, but actually are, perceptions—namely, the perceptions that they seem to be. But, since an impression is not an experience that seems to be a perception, this view is untenable. *S*'s perception of *O*, for example, is not an impression—an instance of its seeming to *S* as if he perceives something. It is (I suggest) simply an instance of the relation expressed by the verb 'perceives' in the sentence '*S* perceives *O*'. This follows from the fact that '*S*'s perception of *O*' is a nominalization of the sentence '*S* perceives *O*'.<sup>30</sup> But it contradicts the idea that a perception is an impression, or a 'slice of sensible experience'—the phrase is Strawson's<sup>31</sup>—if, that is, a slice of sensible experience is meant to be an episode inside the brain, or in the soul, or confined within the subject's skin. For, if *S*'s perception is a relation between *S* and *O* it cannot be confined more narrowly than *S* and *O*.<sup>32</sup>

## X

I shall add a few remarks in conclusion. In the final analysis, the modern causal theory is rooted in two empiricist doctrines: (i) that the foundations of empirical knowledge are propositions about our impressions; and (ii) that

<sup>30</sup> I discuss these constructions at some length in '-ings and -ers', in E. Borg (ed.), *Meaning and Representation—Ratio*, 14 (December 2001), special issue, 298–317.

<sup>31</sup> Strawson, 'Perception and its Objects', in Macdonald (ed.), *Perception and Identity*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Philosophers have sometimes argued that (e.g.) my perception of a tree cannot be an instance of a relation between me and a tree on the grounds that I can have exactly the same experience when there is no tree present for me to be related to. For example, D. M. Armstrong writes as follows: 'There is a most serious objection to [the] attempt to construe mental states as relations to things in the world. Suppose, as is perfectly imaginable, that I have exactly the same perceptual experience as I had when I looked at the tree, but suppose that this time there is no tree there . . . [In this case] there is, by hypothesis, nothing in the world for me to be 'mentally related' to. So no unique, irreducible, relation can be involved. Yet, also by hypothesis, the mental state is no different from the mental state in [the case where I looked at the tree]. So no mental relation of ourselves to things in the world is ever involved' (*A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, rev. edn. (London: Routledge, 1993) 39). This argument is fallacious. For, what is perfectly imaginable is that I should have exactly the same *impression* when there is no tree present. By hypothesis, the *impression* is not different in the two cases. But the mental states which I hold are relations (or, better, instances of relations) are not impressions, but perceptions. Armstrong simply assumes that a perception is a kind of impression, and therefore finds it easy to infer from the fact that impressions are not 'relations to things in the world' that perceptions are not either.

a perception is a species of idea or impression. Strawson has recently attempted to defend P<sub>I</sub> without assuming that (ii) is true. But, as we have seen, the attempt fails for a reason that has been a commonplace in the epistemological literature for several decades. And so it is not surprising that the unexpurgated theory continues to predominate.

In any event, if the modern causal theory is incapable of explaining how our ordinary perceptual beliefs can be reasonable, as I have argued that it is, there are two obvious ways out of the quandary. One is to revert to a form of indirect realism, such as that defended by Ayer or Quine. The other is to accept Kenny's proposal (*contra* (i) ) that, for example, the proposition that there is a table in front of me is evident to me, and therefore I believe it without evidence; and to devise a theory of perception that, unlike (ii), is consistent with it. In the last paragraph but one, I indicated what I believe the core doctrine of this theory ought to be. I shall conclude by commenting briefly on Kenny's proposal.

If it is true, the propositions that we believe without evidence, and that provide the evidence that makes our body of empirical beliefs largely reasonable, include propositions that are not about experiences, but about their objects. This is not to deny that propositions about our sensations or impressions can provide us with evidence. They certainly can. For example, my evidence that the stuff in a bottle is intoxicating may partly consist in my feeling tipsy, and my evidence that the water in a pool is chlorinated may partly consist in my eyes stinging. But although becoming tipsy is a pleasant way of finding out whether the contents of a bottle are intoxicating, it is not an example of sense perception; and although it may be *certain* that the contents of the bottle are intoxicating, it cannot be *evident*.

So, I may accept that the contents of a bottle are intoxicating, or that the water in a pool is chlorinated, on the evidence of my sensations. But, if Kenny is right, I do *not* accept that there is a table in front of me on the evidence of my impressions. In ordinary circumstances, I neither have any evidence that there is a table in front of me, nor need any, because seeing is a way of knowing—and looking is a way of finding out—*without* evidence. Hence, my judgement that there is a table in front of me is made—borrowing a phrase of Wittgenstein's—without a justification, but with a right. And if I am asked how I know that there is a table in front of me, and I reply that I can see it, my answer does not indicate my evidence—namely, the impression of a table. On the contrary, it indicates why evidence is unnecessary.

Obviously, this view of the matter represents a break with the empiricist tradition. But the question of whether this is a merit or a defect in the view is one which I shall not attempt to decide.