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INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART II SERIOUS MISTAKES

CHAPTER NINE:
ABOUT WHAT THE MIND DRAWS FROM EXPERIENCE

9

The reality that is Independent of the human mind, without the existence of which knowledge and truth would be impossible, is one and the same reality for all human beings.

Experience is not independent of the human mind. If it were, we would not speak of it as human experience. To speak of reality as human is to violate an essential feature of it: its independence of the human mind. But while human experience is mind dependent as reality is not, it is also, to a considerable extent, the same for all human beings. The reason why there is a common core in human experience, the same for all human beings, is that experience is dependent on reality as well as upon the human mind.

Two factors, not one, enter into the composition of human experience: reality and the human mind. It is a product of their interaction—reality acting on our senses and our minds responding reactively by its perceptual and conceptual activities. The common core of human experience is the product of that interaction.

John Locke espoused a view of the human mind that had been held by almost all his predecessors in antiquity and the Middle Ages. That view regarded the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, a blank but impressionable tablet. The opposite view, introduced by Immanuel Kant, attributed to the human mind an innate structure, prior to all experience—forms of intuition and categories of the understanding that shaped experience so definitely that our mind determined experience, in effect, became an obstacle to our knowing the reality of things in themselves.

Only if the other view is correct, the view that the mind has no innate perceptual forms and no innate conceptual categories, can it be true that our mind-dependent experience does not preclude us from having knowledge of reality—of things in themselves through that experience. What William James, in *Pragmatism*, called our commonsense categories were not like Kant's transcendental categories.

They were not a priori categories (in the mind prior to all experience). They were a posteriori categories (empirically derived, the product of much common human experience).

I must repeat here what I said in the preceding chapter about the perceptual activities of our minds. When we correctly declare ourselves to be perceiving something, we are at the same time affirming that the perceived object exists in reality. We cannot perceive nonexistent things, though we can be deceived into thinking that we are perceiving when, under pathological conditions, we hallucinate. The thirsty traveler in the desert hallucinates the mirage of a nonexistent waterhole, which he is deceived into thinking he perceives.

This being true, the question we must now confront is whether the perceived object that we affirm to really exist has in reality the character that it is perceived as having in our experience of it. To answer that question with an unqualified and unexceptional affirmative would be a naive realism. Commonsense realism may not be as critical as it should be, but neither is it that naive.

Things are not always as they appear to be. Our general acknowledgment of this simple fact leads to much philosophical sophistication about the differences between appearance and reality, but that sophistication should try to avoid the extreme of regarding all appearances as illusory. Only some are, as when the glittering vein in a rock is mistaken for gold or when a diamond-shaped bit of brilliant glass is mistaken for the real gem. Otherwise, the chair, dog, or tree that we perceive not only really exists and not only has the appearance of a chair, dog, or tree, but, in fact, that is what those three perceived objects really are. What they are *per se* (in themselves) is what they are *quoad nos* (for us).

Our perceptual experience has brought us into contact with the reality of these perceived objects—things that really exist and are what they appear to be. The explanation of why and how this is so requires us now to consider the conceptual factors that enter into our perceptual experience of really existing things.

In the first place, it must be understood that all of our normal perceptions are conceptually enlightened. From this fact arises the most radical difference between human perception and the perceptions that constitute the experience of all other animals. Their perceptual experience is conceptually blind, as human experience also is under the pathological conditions that produce agnosia.

I have discussed such conceptual blindness earlier (in chapter 3, p. 18 (Weekly Journal, #1037); the case of the man who mistook his wife for a hat, the person who could not see the streetcar the sound of which he could hear, or the person who could not see or feel the rose that he recognized by smelling. In all these cases, perception through the avenue of one sense is conceptually blind, but not through another sense. The intellect is cooperating in the perceptual activity through one sense but not in the perceptual activity of another. The pathologically affected patient is conceptually blind when seeing but not when hearing, when touching but not when smelling.

Except for agnosia, the human mind's perceptions are almost always conceptually enlightened, almost never conceptually blind. This means that the intellect normally cooperates with the senses in our perceptual activities or processes. But such cooperation on the part of the intellect need not lead to any distortion of our perceptions in one direction or another.

In scientific observations that are said to be "theory controlled" by one or another of several diverse hypotheses or theories, there may be conceptual coloration in several diverse tints that distort the perceptual process in one direction or another. But this is not the case in our ordinary perceptual experience. That is why I have spoken of our ordinary perceptual experience as being conceptually enlightened.

The concepts that enter into our perceptual experience divide into two classes or kinds. We recognize this division when we speak of certain ideas as being concrete and others abstract. That, of course, is a misstatement, for all ideas (i.e., all concepts) are abstract in the sense that their reference is to universal objects of thought, not to the singular objects of perception. The division intended by that misstatement is one between concepts that are capable of being instantiated in perceptual experience and concepts that cannot be thus instantiated (i.e., for which no perceptible instances can be found).

For example, the concept of chair, dog, or tree is instantiable perceptually, and that is why it is miscalled “concrete.” In contrast, the concept of liberty, justice, or equality is not instantiable perceptually, and that is why it is miscalled “abstract.”

This does not mean, for example, that we have no experience of liberty, but only that liberty is not something we perceive through our senses—our vision, hearing, touch, taste, and so on. Our concept of liberty is empirically derived even if that derivation cannot be attributed to sense perception.

Divided against all empirically derived concepts, both those of which perceptual instances can be found and those that cannot be perceptually instantiated, there is still another class of ideas. Like concepts, their reference is to universal objects of thought, but unlike concepts, they are constructed by the intellect from concepts rather than being abstracted, as concepts are, from experience, perceptual or otherwise. These are called “theoretical constructs” by contemporary philosophers of science. Earlier philosophers called them “fictions of the mind” or *entia rationis* (beings of reason).

These different ways of referring to them call our attention to the same point: namely, that the object of thought to which they refer may or may not exist in reality and can never be perceptually instantiated or otherwise experienced. To discover whether or not the object referred to by such theoretical constructs as *neutrino*, *black hole*, or *God* really exists involves an elaborate process of inference, in which some perceptual experience may be involved, but the question is never settled by perceptual experience alone.*

*I have described the mode of argument involved in affirming the existence of objects signified by theoretical constructs in another book, *How to Think About God* (1980), chapter 10, pp. 94-102, especially p. 98. In his effort to correct the fallacy of reification, William of Ockham formulated a rule of inference that warranted reaching the conclusion that certain imperceptible objects exist in reality. The rule applies in the same way to theological constructs as it does to the constructs of natural science.

My reason for calling attention to these various distinctions—between empirical concepts that can be and cannot be instantiated in perceptual experience, and between both kinds of empirical concepts and theoretical constructs is to point out that when empirical concepts enter our perceptual experience through the cooperation of our intellect with our sensitive powers, they result in what I have called the conceptual enlightenment of our perceptions. Intellectual coloration and, perhaps, distortion occurs only in scientific observations that are theory-controlled and in which theoretical

constructs, not empirical concepts, are involved in the intellect's cooperation with our sensitive powers in perception.

Before we consider the division of our experience into ordinary and special, it is necessary to set aside the portion of our ordinary experience that is private. All of our subjective experience is private—directly accessible to each individual person and to no one else. The realm of private experience includes, as we have seen, all our bodily feelings, our pains and pleasures, our emotions, our desires, our dreams, our fantasies, and our objects of thought when we engage in solitary reflection or meditation.

Only the latter might become objects that we share with others if we turn from private soliloquy to conversation about them with others. The objects of thought in our experience, whether privately considered or discussed with others, may also involve thought about things that really exist and are capable of being perceived or they may have their being only in the minds of those considering them. They may be *entia rationis*—beings or fictions of the mind.

Our private experience has little to do with the reality of the external world in which we live. It may give us some knowledge of our own bodies and of our personal selves, but most of its content is without any cognitive significance. Our cognitively significant experience is for the most part public—experience that we share with others and that is either common or special.

Our ordinary experience is the experience we daily have in the course of our waking lives and that, for the most part, we share with others, and so it is public rather than private. It is mainly our perceptual experience of the really existing things with which we interact as we go about our business and carry on our affairs. In addition to perceptual objects, it may include objects of memory, imagination, and reflective thought. For the most part it serves one or another practical purpose rather than the pursuit of truth or the attainment of knowledge.

This leads us to a negative point in the definition of our ordinary experience. It is experience we all have without its being directed by questions or problems like those that direct investigative efforts in scientific research or inquiry. It comes to us simply by our being awake and conscious and by having our senses acted upon. We make no effort to get it. We are not seeking to answer questions by means of it. We employ no methods to refine it. We use no instruments of observation to obtain it. In short, it is the experience that ordinary persons have and, for the most part, share.

The observations made by scientists in the laboratory or in the field obtain special data not to be found in our ordinary experience. The observational processes of scientific investigation are directed by questions to be answered, problems to be solved, hypotheses to be tested. The results obtained by those purposeful, methodical procedures, entailing elaborate apparatus, instrumentation, and other technical devices, constitute the special experience upon which the scientist depends in his efforts to obtain knowledge about reality, to separate false conclusions from true ones, and to ascertain the probability of his true conclusions.*

*See my prior discussion of ordinary and special experience in *The Conditions of Philosophy* (1968), chapter 7; and in *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985), chapter 4, pp. 102-105.

Not everything that belongs to the ordinary experiences of a particular person is shared by all other human beings. The ordinary day-to-day experiences of the twentieth-century Eskimo, New Yorker, and Hottentot are certainly not the same in all respects. The same may be said of an Athenian living in the fourth century B.C., a Parisian of the thirteenth century, and a New Yorker of the twentieth century. But their experiences do not differ in all respects. There are a certain number of things about which they could immediately communicate with one another if they were to meet and engage in conversation: such as the shift from day to night, some change in the seasons, living and dying, eating and sleeping, losing and finding, getting and giving, standing still and moving about, and so on.

I am assuming here that these communicators are persons of no special learning—persons whose minds have been untouched by science or philosophy. The aid of an interpreter may be needed for translation from one language to another, but that is all.

Those universally shared aspects of daily human experience that do not result from any special efforts to investigate or observe should be regarded as the core of common experience that unites all human beings on earth as participants in one and the same experienced world. This shared common experience includes not only perceived objects but also remembered past events and objects of thought that may or may not be instantiated in reality.

As the special experience that results from scientific investigations, observations, and measurements gives rise to scientific knowledge of reality when reflectively analyzed and interpreted by hypotheses and theories, so the common core of ordinary experience gives rise

to our commonsense knowledge of reality, which may be elaborated on and refined by philosophical analysis and reflection.

When I said at the beginning of this chapter that although human experience is mind-dependent as reality is not, it is nevertheless the same for all human beings to a considerable extent, I had in mind what I have called the common core of ordinary experience that is public, not private.

Commonsense and philosophical realism, implicit in the statement that our common sense and philosophical knowledge of reality derives from the common core of our ordinary public experience, does not overlook the fact that that experience and that knowledge of reality is distinctively human. It is not the experience enjoyed and the knowledge attained by nonhuman animals, who have minds but not intellects and whose sensitive apparatus varies greatly from our own in many respects. Their perceptual experience of reality differs in its sensitive range and acuity from ours. None of it is enlightened by conceptual thought.

Perceptual objects, however, the existence of which we affirm when we perceive them, also really exist for other animals even though the way those objects appear to them may differ greatly from the way they appear to us. That raises a question. Does the way really existing things appear to us more nearly approximate their structure and character than the way these same things appear to other animals? I tend to answer this question affirmatively.

My reason for doing so is that our perceptual experience of reality is intellectually enlightened by commonsense categories and empirical concepts that are derived from the common core of our ordinary experience of reality; theirs is not. In addition, other animals are less likely to be able to correct all the tricks the senses play that result in deceptions rather than perceptions.

Human beings have learned how the senses produce illusions and hallucinations. They know how to correct or avoid them. They are, therefore, seldom misled into mistaking an illusory appearance for a veridical perception of reality, and if some persons are misled, others can always be found to correct them.

The experienced reality of the world in which we live is not a construction of our minds, even though our experience of it is mind dependent as its reality is not. In the course of human history many different worldviews—models *or versions of the world*—have been developed, varying from culture to culture, from time to time,

and from one stage of scientific or philosophical speculation to 'another. In the contemporary world, this variety of worldviews or weltanschauungs also exists.


These are all products of the intellectual imagination. The plurality of worlds thus pictured or imagined should never be confused with the world that we perceive. Nor should these worldviews or world-pictures be assessed for their truth or falsity by their correspondence or noncorrespondence with reality and by pragmatic, empirical tests of such correspondence or noncorrespondence. If some are better and others worse, the only measure of that is the degree to which they can be harmonized and made coherent with our commonsense knowledge of reality, which, being based on the common core of ordinary human experience, is the same for all of us.

The kind of world-making or world-construction that I referred to in the preceding chapter when discussing recent books by Professors Goodman, Bruner, and others is not a cognitive activity at all. Its aim is not knowledge of reality. It may originate in experience, but it goes far beyond that in flights of fancy that are works of the intellectual imagination.

The world-pictures or world-versions thus produced are like the worlds produced in great novels and dramas that we regard as works of imaginative literature, not works of science and philosophy. Professor Bruner is mistaken in his notion that human cognitive activities can be divided into two modes: the explanatory or scientific, and the imaginative or narrative. The latter is not cognitive at all.

The ancients wisely distinguished poetic truth from scientific or philosophical truth. The measure of the latter was its correspondence with the actualities of the real world in which we live. The poetic truth of a story or narration lies rather in its internal coherence and in its conformity with the possible, not the actual. In short, if it is a likely story, believable because it might have happened, it has poetic truth.

Of the many different worldviews or world-versions that the human mind has been able to construct, some have more poetic truth than others, but none should be mistaken for or converted into the really existent world in which we live and that we experience from day to day. Nor should the construction of these fictions of the mind be confused with our efforts to attain knowledge of reality, either through ordinary common experience and the philosophical

refinement of it, or through the special experience derived from scientific investigation and the development of scientific theories emerging about it. 

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