Wittgenstein et les sense data : un réalisme direct ?

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(1) If Ryle, among the leading Oxford figures, had learnt the most from Wittgenstein, Austin was the least influenced. 'Some people like Witters', he remarked, 'but Moore is *my* man'. Austin's impact upon Oxford coincided with Wittgenstein's. How could these two disparate currents be simultaneously assimilated into the mainstream of connective analytic philosophy ? Although Austin's conception of philosophy, *in so far as he had one*, was very different from Wittgenstein's, his practice did not conflict with Wittgenstein's. Austin was, as von Wright nicely characterized him, 'the *doctor subtilis*' of post-war Oxford analytic philosophy, 'the unrivalled master in detecting conceptual shades of linguistic usage—superior in this art even to Wittgenstein'. Philosophers at Oxford may have been diverted by Austin into close examination of linguistic minutiae which Wittgenstein would have passed by, but when it came to the application of such results to specific philosophical questions, there was often little discernible difference between their tactical moves. In practice, *both* could be assimilated (H, 172)

(2) The general doctrine, generally stated, goes like this: we never see or otherwise perceive (or 'sense'), or anyhow we never *directly* perceive or sense, material objects (or material things), but only sense-data (or our own ideas, impressions, sensa, sense-perceptions, percepts, &c.). (SS, 2)

It is essential, here as elsewhere, to abandon old habits of *Gleichschaltung*, the deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies. I am *not*, then —and this is a point to be clear about from the beginning— going to maintain that we ought to be 'realists', to embrace, that is, the doctrine that we *do* perceive material things or objects. (SS, 3)

(3) It is not fair to condemn the ordinary view wholly, nor is it safe: for, if we do, we may lose sight of something important behind it. Distinctions current in language can never be safely neglected. (CW, 46)

To a high degree of such confidence, where it naturally exists, is attached the word belief, and language here, as not infrequently, is true to distinctions which have value in our consciousness. It is not opinion, it is not knowledge, it is not properly even judgement. (CW, 102)

The authority of language is too often forgotten in philosophy, with serious results. Distinctions made or applied in ordinary language are more likely to be right than wrong. Developed, as they have been, in what may be called the natural course of thinking, under the influence of experience and in the apprehension of particular truths, whether of everyday life or of science, they are not due to any preconceived theory. In this way the grammatical forms themselves have arisen; they are not the issue of any system, they were not invented by any one. They have been developed unconsciously in accordance with distinctions which we come to apprehend in our experience. On the other hand, the actual fact is that a philosophical distinction is *prima facie* more likely to be wrong than what is called a popular distinction, because it is based on a philosophic theory which may be wrong in its ultimate principles. This is so far from being appreciated that the reverse opinion is held and there is a tendency to regard the linguistic distinction as the less trustworthy because it is popular and not due to reflective thought. The truth is the other way. Reflective thought tends to be too abstract, while the experience which has developed the popular distinctions recorded in language is always in contact with the particular facts. (CW, 874-5)

Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon—the most favoured alternative method (PP, 182)

One can't abuse ordinary language without paying for it. (SS, 15)

'Real' is an absolutely normal word […] It is, that is to say, already firmly established in, and very frequently used in, the ordinary language we all use every day. Thus *in this sense* it is a word which has a fixed meaning and so can't, any more than can any other word which is firmly established, be fooled around with *ad lib*. (SS, 62)

(4) Philosophers, ancient and modern, have maintained, that the operations of the mind, like the tools of an artificer, can only be employed upon objects that are present in the *mind*, or in the *brain*, where the mind is supposed to reside. Therefore, objects that are distant, in time or place, must have a representative in the mind, or in the brain; some image or picture of them, which is the object that the mind contemplates. This representative image was, in the old philosophy, called a *species* or *phantasm*. Since the time of Descartes, it had more commonly been called an *idea*; and every thought is conceived to have an idea for its object. (T. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Bk II ix, 7)

You begin an important section of your argument by assuming the idea of sensations being *representative*. They { represent—express—stand for } something other than themselves. Now, I venture to think that the idea of such *representation* in philosophy, or psychology rather, is very loose and treacherous and, if used at all, should be preceded by a 'critique' of such *representative* character, and an explanation of the exact sense in which the word representative is used. (CW, 769)

We want to explain knowing an object and we explain it solely in terms of the object known, and that by giving the mind not the object but some idea of it which is said to be like it—an image (however the fact may be disguised). The chief fallacy of this is not so much the impossibility of knowing such image is like the object, or that there is any object at all, but that it assumes the very thing it is intended to explain. The image itself has to be apprehended and the difficulty is only repeated. (CW, 803)

(5) It is a peculiar thing —the result of estimate— and we call it by a peculiar name, opinion. For it, taken in its strict and proper sense, we can use no term that belongs to knowing. For the opinion that A is B is founded on evidence we know to be insufficient, whereas it is of the very nature of knowledge not to make its statements at all on grounds recognized to be insufficient, nor to come to any decision except that the grounds are insufficient; for it is here that in the knowing activity we stop. […] Belief is not knowledge and the man who knows does not believe at all what he knows; he knows it (CW, 99-100)

The situation in which I would properly be said to have evidence for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that's a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn't provide me with more *evidence* that it's a pig, I can now just *see* that it is, the question is settled. And of course I might, in different circumstances, have just seen this in the first place, and not had to bother with collecting evidence at all. (SS, 124)

(6) … the assertion that the moon looks as large as the sun implies that there is something in perception which suggests that the moon is as large; and this is only possible if, under certain circumstances, perception gives us the real relative size. And under certain conditions, it does so. If objects are equally distant from the observer, perception successfully gives their relative size. If we thought that there were no circumstances under which we should perceive the real relative size, we could never assert that one object *looks* as large as another does. Similarly the statement that the stick looks bent implies that, given certain physical conditions, we should see the true shape of objects. (AR, 226)

... it is important to remember that talk of deception only *makes sense* against a background of general non-deception. (You can't fool all of the people all of the time.) It must be possible to *recognize* a case of deception by checking the odd case against more normal ones. If I say, 'Our petrol-gauge sometimes deceives us', I am understood: though usually what it indicates squares with what we have in the tank, sometimes it doesn't—it sometimes points to two gallons when the tank turns out to be nearly empty. (SS, 11-12)

(7) My intention has not been to deny that there are sense-data, if by that is meant that (1) we can understand, to some extent at least, how people wish to use the word "sense-datum" who have introduced it in philosophy, and that (2) sometimes statements of a certain form containing the word "sense-datum" are true, e.g., "I am seeing an elliptical sense-datum "of" a round penny". Nor do I wish to deny that the introduction of this terminology may be useful in helping to solve some philosophical problems about perception; but I do wish to deny that there is any sense in which this terminology is nearer to reality than any other which may be used to express the same facts; in particular I wish to deny that in order to give a complete and accurate account of any perceptual situation it is necessary to use a noun in the way in which "sense-datum" is used, for this leads to the notion that there are entities of a curious sort over and above physical objects which can "have" sensible properties but cannot "appear to have" sensible properties which they have not got. (P, 69)

Those who have in practice used the word "sense-datum" have not spoken as if what they were doing was introducing *merely* an alternative way of saying this same thing over again, but as if this new sentence which they substitute were in some way nearer to the facts. They have the idea that in some sense when a physical object looks red to someone then something really is red, i.e., that there really are in such cases two *objects*, one which looks red and one which *is* red, and that somehow the one which *is* red has generally been overlooked and its existence has now for the first time been recognized. (P, 67-8)

(8) Philosophers say it as a philosophical opinion or conviction that there are sense-data. But to say that I believe that there are sense-data comes to saying that I *believe* that an object may appear to be before our eyes even when it isn't. Now when one uses the word "sense datum", one should be clear about the peculiarity of its grammar. For the idea in introducing this expression was to model expressions referring to 'appearance' after expressions referring to 'reality'. It

was said, e.g., that if two things *seem* to be equal, there *must* be two somethings which *are* equal. Which of course means nothing else but that we have decided to use such an expression as "the appearances of these two things are equal" synonymously with "these two things seem to be equal". Queerly enough, the introduction of this new phraseology has deluded people into thinking that they have discovered new entities, new elements of the structure of the world, as though to say "I believe that there are sense data" were similar to saying "I believe that matter consists of electrons". (BB, 70)

What we did in these discussions was what we always do when we meet the word "can" in a metaphysical proposition. We show that this proposition hides a grammatical rule. That is to say, we destroy the outward similarity between a metaphysical proposition and an experiential one, and we try to find the form of expression which fulfils a certain craving of the metaphysician which our ordinary language does not fulfil and which, as long as it isn't fulfilled, produces the metaphysical puzzlement. (BB, p. 55)

… what Wittgenstein tends to call 'grammatical sentences', that is, sentences expressing rules —or specifying conditions for the application of rules— for the employment of linguistics expressions. Such sentences do have a use in our language games, Wittgenstein says, but this use is a very specific and limited one. They can play a role in the context of teaching a language or, for example, when reminding someone that he has misused a certain expression. Thus if somebody tells a story in which two people are described as playing a game of patience I may remind him that one plays patience by oneself. (JS, 92)

… those who say that a sense datum is a different kind of object from a physical object misunderstand the grammar of the word "kind", … They think they are making such a statement as "A railway train, a railway station, and a railway car are different kinds of objects", whereas their statement is analogous to "A railway train, a railway accident, and a railway law are different kinds of objects". (BB, 64)

(9) The philosopher does not tell us how to decide the question … whether or not a sense datum is identical with, or part of, the surface of an object, and … the question whether the chair or its surface is brown. If these were questions of natural science we should need to be told how to decide them what the method of verification is … But how to decide whether whiteness or a surface or a sense datum is circular? The philosopher does not tell us how to decide between theses … (AWL, 128-9)

This statement is the crux of the present paper. There are certain general criteria which ordinarily enable us to decide whether a given physical object is the same object as we saw at a previous time, whether it is the same object even though many of its properties are different, whether it is a different object from one we saw previously although it has very much the same properties, whether it is now changing its colour and shape, and so on. … can anyone describe or imagine circumstances in which it would b true to say "He saw a certain sense-datum, ceased to see it for five seconds, and then saw *the same sense-datum* again"? (P, 65-6)

None of this excludes the possibility of talking about sense data. But if I decide to do so, Wittgenstein says, I not only have to take care not to confuse normal sensible sentences and grammatical sentences but I shall also have to take my decision seriously, that is, I must not speak of sense data as if they were merely another kind of object —different from ordinary physical objects, but nonetheless objects about which we can speak in similar terms. (JS, 93)

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