

## FRED I. DRETSKE AND THE NOTION OF “ DIRECT PERCEPTION ”

### 1. Introduction

1.1. “Direct perception”, is a key notion which occupies a significant place in the recent philosophy of perception. But Fred I. Dretske dismisses it cheaply in this way; “True enough, I cannot see my coffee cup directly; but neither can I see my own visual imagery directly. What is left? At this point one is inclined to say that the above definition introduces a vacuous concept; everything that we see, everything of which we are visually aware, is seen indirectly.”<sup>1</sup> Strengthening Dretske’s stand point, David Hamlyn notes that if a perceptual belief “is to be analyzed in terms of belief or judgement, the regress must either go on ad infinitum (a very unsatisfactory idea) or it must come to a stop with a belief or judgement that has no basis (an equally unsatisfactory idea). If the latter is what immediate perception is, then either perception must ultimately lack a rationale and thus be arbitrary....”<sup>2</sup> I intend to argue against the major contention implied in the above passages.

1.2 Like any other notion, “direct perception” too is a cloudy one. We intend to clarify its significance by investigating the application which the notion finds in various arguments held by recent perceptual philosophers and parapsychologists.

### 2. Sophisticated employment of the notion by Armstrong and Austin

2.1 Both Armstrong and Austin, on a wider realistic background, introduce the notion of “direct perception”, of course, in a sophisticated way. This context is evidently made explicit by the following statement of Armstrong: “Since sense-impressions do not stand between us and our immediate knowledge of the world, our theory is a Direct realism.”<sup>3</sup> Closely resembling Armstrong’s Austin contends, “....it is not only false but simply absurd to say that such objects as pens or cigarettes are never perceived directly.”<sup>4</sup> These passages suggest the view-pheno-

menologywise—that “perception” is an immediate or direct affair. Though both of them dismiss sense-impressions (or sensedata) as mysterious entities lurking behind perception, the following question can be entertained without involving ourselves in contradiction. Cannot there be a state of affairs or states of affairs other than sense-impressions that may stand as grounds or bases of our perception? A positive answer to this question can be thought of, which shall not be a philosophical error at all. Though Dretske believes that it shall introduce a vacuous concept, it is not the case. If no philosophical error and contradiction are involved, theoretically speaking, a genuine problem stands to which a genuine answer too can be found. “Mediated perception” is not a vacuous concept at all. We hope to make explicit the idea in what follows.

### 3. Russell and Hirst on “direct perception”

3.1. Obviously, with reference to the notion of “direct perception” Russell once observed: “. . . that the whole theory as to the causes of sensation which are partly physical and partly physiological makes it unavoidable that we should regard “perception” as something less direct than it seems to be.”<sup>5</sup> Russellean position clearly demonstrates the meaningfulness of an argument developing on the notion of “direct perception” as against Dretske’s manoeuvre. Needless to add that it being cemented by R. J. Hirst. According to Hirst, “. . . the conceptual processes involved in recognition, the selecting involved in priming and attention, the use of cues or of some degree of interpretation or imaginative enrichment, the influence of learning and past experience on the sensible character of what we see, the operation of the factors that produce object constancy—all these exclude simple confrontation with objects and reveal an immense complexity in perception not dreamt of by common sense.”<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Parapsychology and “direct perception”

4.1 Paradoxically, enough, Hornell Hart reminds us that J. B. Rhine, the eminent parapsychologist in America concluded that the hypothesis of *direct perception*, beyond the physical senses, as the only valid explanation concerning reports of parapsychological research involving something like 3600000 trials. As in the case of telepathy and precognition, for instance, a person is believed to have an awareness of other people’s thoughts and of future

events, respectively. But normal sensory perceptual mechanism together with stimuli bombardments, etc., do not mediate in these awarenesses. The notion of "extrasensory perception" (ESP) is often used to denote them. It is noteworthy that the notion of "direct perception" has a very different use, for instance in Parapsychology, comparatively to Armstrong or Austin or Russell or Hirst.

### 5. Norman Malcolm and "direct perception"

5.1 Norman Malcolm, following G. E. Moore, uses the notion "direct perception" to note a perception of the following sort: "A perceives B directly, if and only if there are some properties of B about which A cannot be mistaken." Malcolm's adoption though similar to Armstrong's yet, has its own qualifications. Armstrong does not speak about any mistake proof perception. To him "the immediate object of awareness is never anything but a physical existent which exists independently of awareness of it."<sup>7</sup> The similarity is seen with reference to properties of objects perceived, say, physical property, at the least. The difference lies with reference to the quality of perception. To Malcolm, it is mistake proof, and, therefore, *direct*: to Armstrong, no mysterious entities lurk behind perception in the sense of a sort of mediation, and, therefore, *direct*.

### 6. A Critical examination of the argument of Dretske and Hamlyn

6.1 In the light of above uses of the notion "direct perception" by well known philosophers and parapsychologists, Dretske's attempt to reject the dialogue involving the notion of "direct perception", though stands as an alternative argument, yet, is unsuccessful. Dretske's attempt amounts to dismissing a philosophical dialogue on the notion of "direct perception"; for, to him, it introduces a vacuous notion—everything we perceive are perceived indirectly. Nevertheless, if we formulate the following—"perception-occurrence", veridicalwise, depends upon other occurrences such as "sensing" and "noticing", being basically different, phenomenologically on the one hand, and the environment and the physicality, ontologically, on the other. "Assuming them as *causes* — sufficient and necessary—of 'perception-occurrence', veridicalwise, it follows by necessity that it being rendered impossible without them. Follows from it, paradoxically enough,

is that 'perception-occurrence' is a mediated affair (conditioned affair) rather than a simple or direct one. The logical conclusion, therefore, seems that perception is, indirect." It's a serious philosophical error to see a kind of vacuity in this line of argument which genuinely attempts to lay bare the phenomenology, ontology and conceptuality of perception.<sup>8</sup>

6.2 David Hamlyn's objection to this line of thought seems developed on the wider contention—seeking a basis or a rationale concerning beliefs. This position needs some critical observation. Most direct realists on perception have made a distinction between perception and belief. Armstrong, a direct realist, very rightly claims that perceptions are not beliefs,<sup>9</sup> and, thus a difference is made explicit, though it stands as a moot point. Hamlyn attempts to shift ground in this connection by emphasizing the need of a basis for the beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, in his own way, however, supplies the answer, though Hamlyn misses it; for the former's contention to the effect that perceptions are not beliefs, evidently suggests a basis for beliefs.

6.3 Paradoxically enough, Hamlyn's another point seems rooting out Armstrong's argument when the former stressed the lack of a rationale which leads to arbitrariness concerning perception. Alternatively speaking, beliefs have a basis— perception—but perception lacks a basis, and therefore arbitrary. But, then, why seeks a basis or rationale concerning perception? Does philosophy of perception exhaust itself if a basis or rationale concerning perception is not available? Alternatively, cannot there be meaningful reflections other than seeking a basis or rationale? Instead of involving in this sort of argument stressed by Hamlyn, a much more profitable one, indeed, is the dialectics of perception. Needless to add that its scope includes the phenomenology, ontology and conceptuality of perception.

## 7. Conclusion

7.1 We attempted to show above that an argument, in favour of or against "direct perception" gradually can take root. It is noteworthy that the notion is neither vacuous as Dretske maintains nor arbitrary as Hamlyn notes. Furthermore, the notion is not contradictory. It is tempting to say, however, that there is no single pattern governing the use of this notion each of which has its own mode of activity; from which it does not follow the vacuity

or contradictory nature or arbitrariness of the notion. To put the point yet more explicitly, entertaining 'perception' as a dependent-mediated affair or direct-simple affair, is not at all amount to an introduction of a vacuous notion. Russell, Hirst, Armstrong and Austin adopt a different line of thought which clearly suggests the meaningfulness of the notion "direct perception." The upshot of our brief analysis is the possibility of a genuine conceptual alternative concerning "direct perception."

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#### NOTES

1. Seeing and Knowing, Fred I. Dretske, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. 64.
2. The Theory of Knowledge, D. W. Hamlyn, Macmillan & Co., London, 1971, p. 185.
3. Perception and the Physical World, D. M. Armstrong, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969, p. 193.
4. Sense And Sensibilia, J. L. Austin, Oxford Paperbacks, 1964, p. 19.
5. My Philosophical Development, Bertrand Russell, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1959, p. 140.
6. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, Vol. LX., 1959-60; IVa — A Reply to Professor Mundle : R. J. Hirst., p. ii; (between p. 78 and p. 79.
7. Perception and the Physical World (op. cit., ) p. xi
8. I argue for these positions in my unpublished Ph.D. thesis entitled "'Perception' : The Theoretical Impossibility of 'perception' as a direct affair," UC, 1973.
9. Perception and the Physical World (op. cit.,) p. 128 See also : Research Papers : Philosophy, A.D.P. Kalansuriya, Lake House Printers, Colombo, 1972, pp. 15-25.
10. The Theory of Knowledge (op. cit.,) p. 185.

