'The Table, Which We See': An Irresolvable Ambiguity

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In the ninth paragraph of Part I of Section XII of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* the following sentence occurs:

> The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind.[1]

Hume's sentence is made up of three co-ordinate clauses separated by colons. As the 'therefore' in its final clause indicates, it lays out an argument. The first two co-ordinate clauses set down, respectively, the two premises; the third the conclusion.

The issue confronting readers is whether the conclusion is adequately supported by the two premises. Generally, that would turn both on whether the conclusion is soundly drawn from the premises and whether these can be truly asserted. What will be contended, however, is that as presented by Hume the argument fails as a non-starter through irresolvable ambiguity, within the context as a whole, in its first premise. Whether, on either of the two demanded readings of its first premise, it would be sound, as also whether both premises could be truly asserted, will also be considered.

A cautionary note, despite anticipating the exposition: the issue of the coherence of the argument as presented by Hume is not one of the interpretation of his philosophy; though, since he wrote the sentence presenting it, his text is obviously pertinent. For, as he states at the beginning of the paragraph, the argument is put forward in the name of what he describes as 'the slightest philosophy'; and he proceeds, in the next four paragraphs, to raise insuperable difficulties for what he calls 'this pretended philosophical system' (tenth paragraph). Admittedly, he accepts the conclusion—at least to the extent that he agrees that what he characterises as 'this uni-

[1] *A Critical Edition*, *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 114. Subsequent quotations are taken from pp. 113-116.

doi:10.1017/S0031819106000039 ©2006 The Royal Institute of Philosophy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819106000039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

versal and primary opinion of all men' (ninth paragraph) that 'the very perception or sensible image is the external object' (fourteenth paragraph) is 'fallible and even erroneous' (tenth paragraph); though in view of the difficulties raised against the philosophical system, he would probably not acquiesce in its further doctrine that 'perceptions in the mind' are instead 'copies or representations' (ninth paragraph) of external objects. The interpretation of Hume's philosophy has throughout the twentieth century been subject to controversy—mainly between mainstream philosophers with an interest in Hume and specialists in Hume studies whose interest in general philosophical issues has sometimes receded into the background. For those whose interests are foremost philosophical there comes a stage where—to adapt Hume's words on a point of literary to philosophical criticism—they must 'repose more Confidence' in their judgment 'than in all the dull Labours of Pedants and Commentators'.[2] In any case, what Hume's own doctrine is, or, indeed, whether he has any position on the external world to defend in his *Enquiry*, is only tangentially relevant to the assessment of an argument he takes to be common ground between himself and other philosophers.

I

Turning to the setting of the argument, Part I of Section XII settles down after a preamble occupying the first four paragraphs to review 'the arguments' bringing 'our very senses … into dispute' employed by 'a certain species of philosophers' (fifth paragraph). These are sceptics, not those philosophers who 'embrace a new system with regard to the evidence of our senses' (tenth paragraph). When sceptics argue against the senses, adherents to the philosophical system defend the senses with a representational account. But then 'the profounder and more philosophical sceptics' (fourteenth paragraph) launch more damaging attacks.

Thus, 'the more trite topics, employed by the sceptics in all ages, against the evidence of *sense*' are contrasted with 'other more profound arguments against the senses, which admit not of so easy a solution' (sixth paragraph). These latter are 'derived from the most profound philosophy' (fifteenth paragraph). This is the philosophy

[2] 'Of Essay-Writing' in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller, revised edition (Indianapolis: Liberty *Classics*, 1987), 536.

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of the profounder sceptics, not of the philosophical system of the senses. These profound sceptical arguments are enumerated at the end of Part I as 'the first philosophical objection to the evidence of sense' and the 'second objection' (sixteenth paragraph). The argument about the table is involved in the first only.

Despite their swift dismissal, the trite topics—that is, patterns of argument—will be found relevant to the argument about the table, even though it features rather in the first philosophical objection—also described as 'a topic' (fourteenth paragraph). For this reason they require attention. They are

> such topics as are derived from the imperfection and fallaciousness of our organs, on numberless occasions; the crooked appearance of an oar in water; the various aspects of objects, according to their different distances; the double images which arise from the pressing one eye; with many other appearances of a like nature. [sixth paragraph]

Significantly, the only organs involved in the three instances specified are the eyes. For evidently: - 'the crooked appearance of an oar in water' alludes to how the oar looks, a result of refraction; 'the various aspects objects, according to their different distances' could only be taken to refer to how things variously sound or smell, or how hot they feel, at different distances if the sounds and the smells of things, as well as the heat they radiate,[3] are counted among their aspects, so that their visual appearance at different distances is presumably meant; and the eye is expressly mentioned in the third instance of double vision. The 'other appearances of a like nature' unspecified at the end might be taken to cover any sense; since although the term 'appearances' has strong visual connotations, Hume may not have intended to restrict it thus. Only, in so far as they are of a non-visual nature, they are arguably not 'of a like nature' to the three instances specified.

Hume thus speaks of the senses generally while apparently thinking of sight only. 'These sceptical topics,' he continues,

> are only sufficient to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason … in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper *criteria* of truth and falsehood.

[3] Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), 226 (I iv 4, third paragraph).

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Specifically, the evidence of the senses must be corrected by 'considerations, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and the disposition of the organ'. Clearly, 'the nature of the medium' covers refraction of light by water of the first instance; the second instance concerns distance expressly but visual distance seems to be meant; and 'the disposition of the organ' alludes to the depression of the eye resulting in double vision listed as the third instance.

Having despatched the trite topics in the sixth paragraph, Hume starts his account of the first philosophical objection with an outline in the seventh and eighth paragraphs of what he sums up at the beginning of the ninth paragraph as 'this universal and primary opinion of all men'. He writes that men

> are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe, which depends not on our perception, but would exist, though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated. [seventh paragraph]

The switch from the third person, 'men' to the first person, 'we' is drawn to readers' attention on the switch back from 'we always suppose' to 'they always suppose' in the next paragraph, where a further point is made:

> when men follow this blind and powerful instinct of nature, they always suppose the very images, presented by the senses, to be the external objects, and never entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but the representations of the other. This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. [eighth paragraph]

People without exception always suppose an external world—hence the use of 'we'. But not all always follow the instinct of nature to repose faith in their senses: sceptics do not always do so and thus do not always suppose that 'the very images, presented by the senses' are 'external objects', a supposition that the switch from 'we' to 'they' signals is to be 'acknowledged fallible and even erroneous' (tenth paragraph). Whereas there is no implication that the supposition of an external world might be erroneous, it is implicit that they err who identify sensory images with external objects.

The second stage of the first philosophical objection, invokes, in the ninth paragraph, 'the slightest philosophy, which teaches us,

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that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception' so that there cannot be 'any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object'. The sentence about the table follows as an application of this general point. The next sentence begins: 'These are the obvious dictates of reason'—presumably referring back to the teachings of 'the slightest philosophy' adumbrated at the start of the paragraph. The overall moral is then drawn:

> no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. [ninth paragraph]

To summarise the later stages, the four following paragraphs raise difficulties for the resulting philosophical system of the senses; and finally in the fourteenth paragraph, the dilemma constructed by the profounder sceptics is stated, whether to follow instinct or reason —in the guise of the philosophical system—together with arguments against each horn. The dilemma and these arguments are reiterated in the summary of the first philosophical objection in the first sentence of the sixteenth, and last, paragraph.

II

Some comments on the context of the argument about the table.

First, since the case of the table undeniably exemplifies 'the various aspects of objects, according to their different distances', which was the second of the three instances of the trite topics, what differentiates them from the first of the 'more profound arguments against the senses, which admit not of so easy a solution'? The implication is that the trite topics do admit of an easy solution. If so, it seems that the argument about the table admits of one too; and thus disposed of, the first philosophical objection cannot reach its dilemma. Significantly, since the trite topics are concerned exclusively with sight, the argument about the table likewise turns on peculiarities of vision, holding no lessons for the senses generally. A further difficulty perhaps arises from the description of the teachings of 'the slightest philosophy' as 'the obvious dictates of reason'; for the trite topics were dismissed on the score that they showed only that the evidence of the senses had to be corrected by reason. Since reason is spoken of in connection with both profound and trite topics, again, the basis for the distinction would seem to be suspect.

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This last difficulty may appear to be easily removed. The resemblance between these references to reason, it may be urged, is only superficial: 'the obvious dictates of reason' can be taken as no more than a forcible assertion that the conclusion of the argument about the table follows, so that the profound topic has a basis in sound reasoning; whereas when the trite topics were dismissed, reason—understood as the intellect—was being opposed to the senses. Yet far from tacitly distinguishing reason from reasoning, Hume apparently assimilates them—given their juxtaposition in the first sentence of the seventh paragraph, 'without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason'. In the tenth paragraph it is said that so far in the account of the profound objection 'are we necessitated by reasoning' to embrace the philosophical system of the senses, which is later described as 'a more rational opinion' (fourteenth paragraph) and even identified with 'reason' in contrast with 'natural instinct' (sixteenth paragraph).

All these difficulties can be put aside by acknowledging that the argument about the table is itself one of the trite topics. There was never any suggestion that by itself it constituted the first philosophical objection; it was just one stage in it. Obviously, the motive for dismissing the trite topics is that they are insufficient by themselves to subvert the senses. For the 'considerations' whereby their evidence is corrected by reason serve rather to strengthen it. Since the argument about the table falls under the second instance given of the trite topics, these considerations must apply in its case too—the relevant one being 'the distance of the object'. The argument will not just admit of an easy solution once reasoning is brought to bear on it; more importantly, like the other trite topics listed, its scope will not extend beyond sight to the remaining four senses. Remarkably, in his characterisation of the trite topics Hume has himself supplied material for the rejoinder by Reid—as will emerge.

Why then does Hume revert, when presenting the first philosophical objection, to an argument of the type he had dismissed as insufficient to attack the senses? Now, whereas 'the sceptics in all ages' have sought, but failed, to impugn the senses with their trite topics, the argument about the table has in itself no such result—even though it forms a part of the first philosophical objection to the senses. Those who embrace a new, philosophical system of the senses are seeking rather to come to their aid through distinguishing 'perceptions in the mind' from external objects, a distinction the argument about the table is intended to establish. The attack on the senses by the first philosophical objection lies instead in the dilemma whether to follow reason or natural instinct. The trite topics, in

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short, need not invoke the philosophical distinction between perceptions and external objects. True sceptics, indeed, would abjure all tenets, as Hume hints in paragraph five; and so would not argue for it. And for those non-sceptics unconvinced that the abstraction of 'perceptions in the mind' has any useful application to all five senses, that the trite topics do not inevitably lead to the philosophical distinction is a point of recommendation, since by employing them alone the sceptical attack can readily be rebutted. But without the distinction the first philosophical objection cannot get started.

Conversely, since those who embrace the philosophical system seek to establish the distinction, and since the argument about the table does not in principle differ from the trite topics, these topics too could be employed in an attempt to establish it. In fact, in the section entitled, '*Of scepticism with regard to the senses*' in his *Treatise*, Hume relies on the third instance of double vision to introduce the philosophical system. He also mentions

> the seeming encrease and diminution of objects, according to their distance; … the apparent alterations in their figure; … the changes in their colour and other qualities from our sickness and distempers; and … an infinite number of experiments of the same kind; … .

The 'other qualities' may hint at the tastes, besides temperatures and smells, of things; but the other 'experiments' specified are purely visual phenomena.[4] Lest charges of carelessness and inattention be levelled, it should be observed that these 'experiments', demonstrate specifically in Hume's view 'that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience'; but he does go on to say that they also lead philosophers to distinguish 'betwixt perceptions and objects'.[5]

Secondly, the reason why those who still 'repose faith in their senses' 'never entertain any suspicion' that things they see and feel, like this 'very table', are only 'perceptions in the mind' must be that they—unlike those who reflect—are quite unaware of any distinction between perceptions and external objects; and so Hume accuses them of mistaking the one for the other—as he had done on more than one occasion in his *Treatise*.[6] In his *Enquiry* the belief that

[4] *Treatise*, I iv 2, forty-fifth paragraph (211); cf. I iv 4, third paragraph (226).

[5] *Treatise*, I iv 2, forty-fourth and forty-sixth paragraphs (210, 211).

[6] *Treatise*, I iv 2: fourteenth paragraph (193), thirty-first paragraph (202), thirty-sixth paragraph (205) and thirty-eighth paragraph (206).

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things seen and felt are themselves external objects is described without further elaboration as the 'universal and primary opinion of all men'. In the last two of the passages cited from his *Treatise* in the previous note, however, he had also remarked that even philosophers themselves spend the greatest part of their lives in unthinking and unphilosophical pursuits, and so suppose that what are in fact only their perceptions are real bodies. Now, the curious consequence of a reversal in their unreflective periods by those who reflect to the supposition of the unreflecting generality would be that they, unlike the latter, have inconsistent beliefs. In view of this, it is all the more incumbent on 'philosophy'—the term will be commented on shortly—to provide some argument to show that what is seen or felt cannot itself be an external object but can only be a perception; otherwise doubt is raised whether such a strange inconsistency results only because the notion here of a perception is not fully intelligible.

In his *Treatise* Hume repeatedly asserts that whatever is before the mind is only a perception.[7] The casual way he introduces the doctrine is striking. Reid in his rejoinder to the argument about the table, in Chapter XIV of Essay II of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, remarks: 'The passage now quoted is all I have found in Mr HUME'S writings upon this point' (*IP* 207)[8]—the passage being the whole of the ninth and the first sentence of the tenth paragraph of Part I of Section XII of Hume's *Enquiry*; and the point being 'one other argument' Reid has been able to find 'urged against our perceiving external objects immediately' (*IP* 206) in the writings of philosophers generally. For as Reid comments in his analysis of the passage: 'Hitherto I see nothing that can be called an argument. … The argument, the only argument follows' (*IP* 209). He then turns to the sentence about the table.

A passage in a later section of Hume's *Treatise* foreshadows this argument: -

> The most vulgar philosophy informs us, that no external object can make itself known to the mind immediately, and without the interposition of an image or perception. That table, which just

[7] *Treatise*, I ii 6, seventh paragraph (67); I iv 2: fourteenth paragraph (193), twenty-first paragraph (197) and forty-seventh paragraph (212).

[8] Facsimile edition (Menston: The Scolar Press, 1971). Cited by '*IP*' followed by page number(s). Reid's rejoinder occurs on pp. 178-183 of *A Critical Edition, The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid*, edited by Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

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now appears to me, is only a perception, and all its qualities are qualities of a perception.[9]

The assertions here scarcely amount to argument; the sentence in his *Enquiry* at least has a 'therefore'. In writing that the treatment there adds 'nothing new', H. H. Price forgets Hume's creditable attempt to remedy a deficiency in the earlier work.[10]

John P. Wright thinks Reid mistaken in 'claiming' that the example of the table 'was the sole argument put forward by Hume in support of his conclusion that we only perceive ideas in our minds'.[11] He omits to say which he thinks are the other arguments on the point Reid missed in Hume. Introducing the sentence about the table, Wright speaks of 'the form of argument for the dependent and discontinuous status of perceptions which Hume presents in the *Enquiry*'.[12] An argument about the status of perceptions is hardly an argument for the conclusion that what is seen or felt cannot itself be an external object. Wright does not even himself take the sentence about the table to be concerned solely with the status of perceptions; for in stating 'the form of Hume's argument more generally' he continues: 'we can conclude that the perceptual object is not the real and independent object'. 'The argument', he goes on to say, 'shows the non-identity of two objects, by showing that the one has a property which the other does not have'.[13]

Wright has expressed the conclusion of the argument in three different ways: 'that we only perceive ideas in our minds'; 'the dependent and discontinuous status of perceptions'; and 'that the perceptual object is not the real and independent object'. The second suggests why he supposes Reid mistaken in saying that no other argument on the point occurs in Hume. In the passage in his *Treatise* about the 'experiments' Hume speaks of 'a very little reflection and philosophy' being 'sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that opinion'—the opinion being that 'sensible objects or perceptions' have 'a continu'd existence'.[14] His talk here of reflection and

[9] *Treatise*, I iv 5, fifteenth paragraph (239).

[10] H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), 105. Cf. Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief, A Study of his First* Inquiry (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), viii.

[11] *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester University Press, 1983), 81, n. 20.

[12] Op. cit. note 11, 51.

[13] Op. cit. note 11, 52.

[14] *Treatise*, I iv 2, forty-fourth paragraph (210).

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philosophy, together with his example of double vision, might appear to pre-echo the discussion in his *Enquiry*. But the opinion he is referring to in his *Treatise* is not, as in his *Enquiry*, the 'universal and primary opinion of all men' that things seen and felt are external objects. Instead, as was noted earlier, it is 'the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions'—a doctrine of philosophers that those who still repose faith in their senses could not hold since the latter have no notion of a 'sensible perception' as distinct from an external object. If different conclusions of different arguments are muddled, several arguments mentioned by Hume might be cited to prove Reid mistaken in saying that Hume has only one on the point. Besides, attempting to construct an amalgam of doctrine culled from apparently similar passages in Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, shorn of their context, nullifies his labour of revision.

There is likewise some resemblance between the argument about the table and the one—beginning the section, '*Of the modern philosophy*' in Hume's *Treatise*—'deriv'd from the variations of those impressions, even while the external object, to all appearance, continues the same'. The impressions concerned are 'colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold'.[15] This argument of 'the modern philosophy' is not intended to show that whatever is seen or felt can be only a perception: it concerns only the qualities of the objects of the senses. Although it argues that some of their supposed qualities are only perceptions, it does not impugn their status as external objects; for it allows that the remaining, primary qualities are qualities of external objects, not just qualities of perceptions. This argument is the starting point for the second of the 'more profound arguments against the senses' presented in Hume's *Enquiry*—though Hume does not there restate his own highly original criticism in his *Treatise* of the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities based on the peculiarities of touch, but instead borrows one of Berkeley's criticisms. The sentence later in Hume's *Treatise* about the table, in saying that all its qualities are qualities of a perception, relies additionally on criticism of what 'the modern philosophy' argues.[16]

Finally, it has already been noticed that the term 'philosophical' is used to describe not only the objections against the senses of the profounder sceptics but also the system of the senses whereby perceptions presented to the mind are representations of external objects. The term 'philosophy' in the phrase 'the slightest

[15] *Treatise*, I iv 4, third paragraph (226).
[16] *Treatise*, I iv 5, fifteenth paragraph (239).

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philosophy' cannot be taken to be referring to sceptics. For quite apart from whether sceptics have any doctrine to teach, one purpose of the qualification 'slightest' is to widen the scope of the term. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 'philosophy' encompassed natural philosophy—what today is called physics.[17] Commenting on the similar phrase in Hume's *Treatise*, 'a very little reflection and philosophy', Price writes: '"Philosophy" here means Elementary Science'.[18] The only great philosophers Hume is prepared to nominate are Galileo and Newton.[19] As Price also remarks: 'in Hume's time the term "philosopher" would cover the scientists as well; and no doubt Hume … has them also in mind'.[20] So it seems that 'philosophy' in the phrase 'the slightest philosophy' could almost be replaced by the term 'science'.

Yet the teachings Hume outlines as common between himself and other philosophers are scarcely matters of science: philosophical issues in today's sense of 'philosophical' are also involved. After all, Hume and his predecessors he has in mind, such as Descartes and Locke, are read for philosophy, not science. Admittedly, Hume declares it to be 'a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them', to be determined by experience (twelfth paragraph). He accordingly also seems to regard as simply a matter of fact to be established by experience that things seen and felt are only perceptions, not external objects themselves. Now, 'the slightest philosophy' sounds suspiciously like the muddled thinking resulting from taking the unsubtle metaphors of popular science too literally, which throughout the ages has passed for philosophy—especially philosophy of mind. Popular science, as distinct from science itself, involves an attempt to accommodate the theories and findings of science to ordinary, non-scientific ways of thinking. To be done well the job demands not just a knowledge of science but a flair for philosophical think-

[17] Cf. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), 720 (IV xxi 2) and the annotation by Beauchamp in his Critical Edition (p. 152) to the second paragraph of part I of Section VII (p. 50). See also Antony Flew, *David Hume Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 2.

[18] Op. cit. note 10, 106. See also John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1968), 9, n.; and Antony Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 18.

[19] 'Of the Middle Station of Life', *Essays*, 550.

[20] Op. cit. note 10, 25. See also the annotations by P. H. Nidditch in his revision of the edition of Hume's *Enquiries* by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 356, 359 and 362.

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ing. Nowadays most practitioners are neither philosophers nor scientists. But historically, philosophers, aware that philosophical issues arise in attempting to connect scientific theory to ordinary thought, have often also succumbed to temptations to adapt scientific theories for their own philosophical ends. Whereas scientific theory has to answer to the facts, philosophical doctrine has to answer to the more demanding criteria of intelligibility and coherence. The difficulty for Hume and his predecessors is how experience could determine what is seen and felt to be only perceptions in the mind. For what is seen and felt is part of experience; and so is not to be determined by experience but is instead what experience determines—in other words, reveals. Moreover, the value of the notion of 'an image or perception'—apparently applicable to the objects not only of sight but also of the other four senses, including touch—can be assessed only by philosophers.

Allowing 'the slightest philosophy', however, that the presence of perceptions, as distinct from external objects themselves, could be a matter of fact capable of being established by experience, there is still room for argument. For in scientific thinking it may be shown that a hypothesis about some matter of fact is not merely false but cannot be true—for instance, that if it were, various observations that had be made would not have been made. Argument—as distinct from the mere statement of fact that something is or is not so—is required to show that something cannot be so. Those who have not reflected and so still repose faith in their senses have yet to be disabused of the 'universal and primary opinion' that things seen and felt are external objects themselves. 'Philosophy' has to argue that only 'an image or perception' 'can ever be present to the mind'. Hume's *Enquiry*, unlike his *Treatise*, tries to give an argument.

The question remains whether the argument is, as Hume supposes, merely scientific—what is popularly known as 'technical'—or genuinely philosophical. If the argument is bad, as it surely is, can it be replaced by a sound 'technical' argument for the contrary conclusion, as Reid proposes? Or is purely philosophical counter-argument also required to unmask confusion behind it?

III

The sentence about the table has a specious symmetry. Each of its three co-ordinate clauses contains a subordinate clause introduced by 'which' following a comma after the previous word, the antecedent of the relative clause. The third 'which' clause, it might

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be assumed, follows whatever pattern the two previous ones exhibit. Indeed, a careless misreading of the third co-ordinate clause, while not suggested by, accords with this assumption. But whereas the clauses introduced by the first and second 'which' both terminate with a second comma, the third is followed by a full stop, the end of the sentence having been reached. As it is not marked off from its main clause with twin commas, while they are, the presumption is that, on the contrary, it should not be read in any way that either of them would allow. The absence of a second comma is not the only difference: they, unlike it, both qualify the grammatical subject of the main clause.

The careless misreading of the third co-ordinate clause is suggested, not by any apparent parallel between its 'which' clause and the two previous ones, but by its initial 'It'. The first co-ordinate clause has as its subject 'The table, which we see'; the subject of the second is 'the real table'. Being the grammatical subject of the third co-ordinate clause, 'It' appears at first to be referring to the table. This momentary impression is strengthened by the occurrence shortly after of the possessive 'its' in the phrase 'its image'. But the aim of the argument surely is to distinguish 'the real table', spoken of in the second co-ordinate clause, from 'The table, which we see', spoken of at the beginning of the sentence. So the 'It' of the third co-ordinate clause can hardly be referring simply to 'the table'; for then it will be unclear which of the two tables just spoken of—and contrasted—is meant: 'the real table' or 'The table, which we see'. Either reading would be unacceptable: 'the real table' cannot be concluded to have been only its image, since that would contradict the teachings of 'philosophy'—namely, that there is a distinction between the object and its image; but if the 'It' referred to 'The table, which we see', then since this table is apparently being argued to have been only an image, the conclusion would have to be that this table, which was only an image, was only its own image—a virtual tautology.

Perhaps because of the danger of misreading this 'It' as a reference to a noun earlier in the same sentence, some modernised editions start a new sentence with it.[21] Although the replacement of a colon with a full stop seems today even more slight once the eighteenth-century convention is observed of using an initial capital after a colon as well as at the start of a new sentence, the unity of Hume's sentence is thereby broken. The replacement of the second

[21] For instance, the edition of Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 161.

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colon in the original sentence with a full stop in Reid's quotation (*IP* 207) is, however, probably a printer's error; because when Reid repeats Hume's words—albeit outside quotation marks (*IP* 209)—this colon is restored.

The third co-ordinate clause is rendered perfectly intelligible by taking its 'It', not as referring back to some previous noun, but as an impersonal 'it' referring forward to a clause to be introduced. Often such an impersonal 'it' indicates that the subsequent clause is the true subject of the sentence. For example, replacing the initial 'It' with the clause projectively referred to in the sentences, 'It was doubtful whether he ever went' and 'It is certain that she never left' yields the more grammatically perspicuous sentences, 'Whether he ever went was doubtful' and 'That she never left is certain'. This kind of impersonal 'it' can always be eliminated. When such an impersonal 'it' stands for a relative clause, introduced by 'which' (besides 'who', 'whom' and 'whose') or 'that', replacement eliminates not just the 'it' but also the relative pronoun: what was the relative becomes the main clause. This impersonal 'it', whose complement is an antecedent together with its relative clause, is an element in what is known as a cleft construction, used as a syntactical means of emphasis. A cleft construction can always be removed—with loss of emphasis—by deleting both the impersonal 'it' and its complementary relative pronoun to yield, with necessary grammatical adjustments, the remainder of the relative clause, which survives, but as the main clause. For example, the sentence, 'Was it the man whom you met yesterday that telephoned?' becomes 'Did the man whom you met yesterday telephone?'—the survival of the other relative pronoun here demonstrating that its clause is a different kind from the one in a cleft construction. Applying this elimination procedure to the third part of Hume's sentence requires deleting both the initial impersonal 'It' and the relative pronoun 'which'. The third co-ordinate clause then becomes 'Nothing but its image, therefore, was present to the mind'. The 'its' refers to 'the real table' of the second co-ordinate clause.

In general a relative clause qualifies the term, its antecedent, of an assertion or a question by making an assertion about it. Even when the main clause expresses a question—as in the sentence, 'Did the man whom you met yesterday telephone?'—though the question cannot assert anything, the relative clause does—here, that you met the man yesterday. The same applies to a relative clause in the protasis of an 'if … then' sentence, and in other non-assertive contexts. The relative clause in a cleft construction, too, qualifies the assertion made or question asked; but since the main clause with its

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impersonal 'it' is a preamble to the relative clause, the focus is on the antecedent in the main clause. In this way the antecedent thus qualified is picked out by the syntax from the remainder of the main clause for emphasis.

Now, either the qualification added by the assertion limits the scope of application of the antecedent so as to distinguish what it applies to from other things it could apply to; or it is asserted of the antecedent independently of whatever the main clause expresses—that is, without restricting the scope of the antecedent. There are thus two mutually exclusive ways of understanding antecedents of relative clauses giving rise to two kinds of clause. The first is known as restrictive or defining; the second as non-defining. This distinction, under the names 'determinative' and 'explicative', is found in the Port-Royal Logic[22]—so would have been known to Hume.

There are two tests, indeed criteria, for the distinction. The test for a defining clause is whether any contrast is implied between the antecedent thus qualified and any other things the antecedent could apply to but without the qualification restricting its scope. If so, the clause is defining. As the Port-Royal Logic puts it, the clause 'restricts' the 'signification' of its antecedent 'and causes it no longer to be taken through its entire extension, but only for a part of it';[23] 'thus it restricts it and determines its signification'.[24] The test for a non-defining clause is whether, when the relative pronoun is replaced by the antecedent, an assertion independent of whatever is expressed by the main clause results—after any requisite grammatical adjustments; so that either the main clause or what was originally the relative clause could each stand alone with their meaning unchanged. As the Port-Royal Logic puts it, the clause 'can be called a simple explication' in that it 'changes nothing in the idea' of the antecedent; it 'is only incidental to the whole proposition', so that 'we can substitute the subject itself for the pronoun'[25]—that is, replacing the relative pronoun with its antecedent yields an independent assertion. A corollary is that when the relative clause can be omitted without affecting the meaning of the main clause, it is non-defining; but when the clause is indispensable to the meaning of the whole, it is defining. The way the meaning is affected is through the

[22] Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, edited by Jill Vance Buroker, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89-90, 92-93 (II vi, vii); cf. I viii (44-45).

[23] I viii (45).

[24] II vi (89).

[25] II vi (89).

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scope of the antecedent; so if the clause cannot be omitted without widening the scope of its antecedent, it is defining.

With non-defining clauses, when the main clause expresses an assertion, the relative clause expresses an additional assertion; but when the main clause expresses a question, the relative clause expresses an assertion independently of the question. Most relative clauses occurring in questions are defining: since questions do not make assertions, the only need to make an assertion within a question is to determine more precisely one of its terms. The defining clause in 'Have you read the book that I sent?' serves to identify the book in question so as to distinguish it from other books. Without the clause, unless some book had been previously mentioned, it would be unclear what book was meant; so the clause cannot be dropped. But the relative clause in the question, 'Why does God, who is supposed to be infinitely good, allow evil to occur?' is a reminder that helps to clarify the problem raised; since the clause can be omitted without affecting the meaning of the main clause, it is non-defining.

The relative clause in a cleft construction cannot be dropped because the main clause leads up to it, the focus of the sentence; so it is always defining. Non-defining clauses, by contrast, are like words in brackets, additional material that may be omitted. In modern written English they are usually marked off from the main clause by twin commas—but a single comma if the clause occurs at the end of the sentence. Hence the relative clause in a cleft construction is never in modern written English marked off from the main clause by twin commas. First, unlike a non-defining clause it cannot be omitted and so is not a parenthesis. Second, the main clause cannot continued after the end of the relative clause for there to be any need for a second comma because antecedent and relative clause together exhaust the complement of the impersonal 'it'. Third, in modern written English the antecedent of a defining clause generally is not customarily separated from the clause with a comma.

The third co-ordinate clause in Hume's sentence turned out to be a cleft construction; so its relative clause must be defining. Even if the two previous 'which' clauses were also both defining, since the third occurs in a cleft construction with only an impersonal 'it' for its subject, it cannot parallel them. So much for the illusion of symmetry. Do the first two 'which' clauses at least parallel one another? And are they both defining or both non-defining? For relative clauses introduced by 'which' allow of either reading—unlike those introduced by 'that' or those in colloquial speech and informal writ-

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ing where the relative pronoun has been elided, both of which are only defining. The first 'which' clause is thus potentially ambiguous: Hume might be either implicitly distinguishing a seen table from an unseen table or saying something about a table he has already mentioned and adding that this self-same table is seen. How, then, is its antecedent, 'The table' to be understood?

Perhaps it will be denied, as Hamilton does in notes he marks by repeated asterisks in his edition of Reid, that we see 'any distant thing' as distinct from 'rays of light'.[26] But that we see the table is presupposed in the argument's first premise however it is understood: on the defining interpretation a table, identified as seen, is implicitly contrasted with some other table not seen; and on the non-defining interpretation a table, identifiable in some way other than as seen, is said also to be seen. The mess Hume falls into, it will emerge, could have been avoided if, like Berkeley, he had not allowed that a thing like a table is in a straightforward sense seen. Had the premise implied that what we see is only the table's image, there would have been no need for any argument that only an image can be present to the mind, not an external object, when we see the table. There would have been assertion only—as with the sentence in his *Treatise* about the table.[27]

Certainly, 'The table, which we see, … ' appears at first to balance 'but the real table, which exists independent of us, … '. Now, the latter clause can be determined, by applying the two tests, to be non-defining. First, there can hardly be any implicit contrast between a real table with independent and some other real table with dependent existence; because the aim of the argument is to show that whereas any real table has independent, 'The table, which we see' can only have dependent existence. Secondly, since the clause serves as a reminder that any real table has independent existence, it contains merely an additional assertion. It can thus be dropped without changing the scope of its antecedent, 'the real table' to yield 'but the real table suffers no alteration'. Since the second 'which' clause demands a non-defining interpretation, the first, it would seem, must be given one too if the two clauses are to be counterparts.

Yet it might seem obvious that the first 'which' clause could only be defining. Take the test for a defining clause. The argument expressly contrasts 'The table, which we see' with 'the real table,

[26] *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, edited by sir William Hamilton, eighth edition (1895); facsimile edition, two volumes in one (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1983), 304, notes to *IP* 210-212.

[27] See note 9 above.

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which exists independent of us' in order to draw its conclusion that what is present to the mind is not the real table but only its image. Thus, 'The table, which we see' would seem to be implicitly contrasted with some table which we do not see—what turns out to be the real table if the conclusion is accepted. Applying the corollary, if the clause, 'which we see' is dropped, the reference becomes obscure, it might be thought; because without the clause to identify what table is being talked about, the definite article, 'The'—in contrast with the indefinite article, 'A'—could not alone secure reference. More significantly, it might be urged, since Hume, in speaking of the senses generally while apparently having only vision in mind, uses the general word 'seems', the visual character of the phenomenon the argument appeals to would escape readers if the first 'which' clause were omitted—unless 'seems' is replaced by 'looks'.

All that seems to remain to support the non-defining reading of the first 'which' clause are the commas marking it off from the main clause. But the conventions Hume (or his printer) came to adopt were evidently not designed to differentiate non-defining from defining clauses. Consider some of the other relative clauses just in the same paragraph. True, the relative clause in the preceding sentence—'the slightest philosophy, which teach us … '—is non-defining; since the lesson is taught not by one kind of philosophy only, but by any amount of philosophy however small. The end of the clause is the end of the sentence, so the clause constitutes an additional remark which could stand by itself as a further sentence once the relative pronoun had been replaced by its antecedent. Yet the first two relative clauses in the next sentence—'no man, who reflects, … '; and 'the existences, which we consider, … '—are defining, even though they are separated off by commas: those who reflect contrast with those who do not; and there are existences not considered by us.

The register in Beauchamp's Editorial Appendix of variants in earlier editions reveals, in changes in the style adopted for relative clauses, a departure from informality in the earliest editions to stiffer writing—as is most obviously indicated by the ten or so instances where a preposition at the end of the clause is later placed before the relative pronoun. The most frequent change, with over forty instances, is the replacement of the relative 'that' by 'which'; the next, with over thirty-five instances, is the insertion of 'which' where previously any relative pronoun had been elided. In three cases a 'which' is inserted where originally the relative pronoun had been elided and then later editions insert a comma after its

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antecedent. With the pronoun elided, the clause is defining only. Hence the later insertion of a comma after the antecedent can be no indication that the clause is non-defining—as it would be on the conventions of modern written English. One of these three cases is in the first co-ordinate clause in the sentence about the table: 'The table, which we see' started off as 'The Table we see', then changed to 'The table which we see' before taking its final form.[28]

Although this evidence from earlier editions seems conclusive, the most it demonstrates is that Hume intended the first 'which' clause to be defining. It does not show that the clause is unambiguous: authors can be unaware of ambiguities in what they write. The non-defining interpretation, it will be contended, cannot be excluded. But it is not just a fall-back: it is demanded by the argument. Yet the same is true also of the defining interpretation. As both of two incompatible readings of the first premise are required, the argument is incoherent.

IV

The defining interpretation of the first premise is required by the argument because the second premise speaks of the real table. Talk of 'the real table' cannot contrast with what is describable as no more than 'The table': some qualification is needed to limit the scope of the antecedent, 'The table' so as to exclude the real table—the sort of qualification provided by a defining clause. A real table contrasts with, not just a table: but, say, a drawing, painting, model, reflection or an image of a table; or a toy, dreamt or an imaginary table. So the qualification that the table is seen is needed and cannot be dropped if its distinction from the real table is to be intelligible. Hence, as an initial reading strongly conveys, 'The table, which we see' contrasts with 'the real table, which exists independent of us'—thereby passing the test for a defining clause. Any expectation of symmetry was misplaced: the two relative clauses, far from balancing, contrast with one another. For unlike the seen table, which excludes unseen tables, the real table, in being a table, is unrestricted in its application to members of the class of tables.

Consider the test once more: a table in view is being implicitly contrasted with other tables not in view. Imagine a guide announcing to some tourists, 'The table which we see here is one of a pair'.

[28] Beauchamp's Critical Edition, p. 267, entry for 114.11. The other two cases are at 26.4 and 87.25 (pp. 239 and 258).

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The contrast is between the table the tourists are being shown and all other tables, including the twin of the shown table. Trouble comes with Hume's 'we': he must mean anybody; not a specific group of people seeing a particular table as opposed to others who do not see it but might see other tables. Now, a table anybody sees is a table anybody could see. Hence Hume, unlike the guide, has no need for some orientating word like 'here'; for he means any table anybody could see, not some particular table in some people's view. So the contrast must be between a table that can be seen by anybody and some other kind of table that cannot be seen by anybody—the table anybody could see and the table nobody could see. For the implied universality of 'we' precludes a contrast between one particular table and others; instead, the contrast becomes one between any table in so far as it is seen and a kind of table incapable of being seen.

The trouble is that if the first 'which' clause with its antecedent implicitly distinguishes the table in so far as it is seen from the real table, it will already contain the conclusion to be proved: it will take for granted that whenever we see any table, we do not see a real table; moreover, regardless whether we move away, so that the second of the 'considerations', of 'the distance of the object', is rendered irrelevant—though the argument is meant to turn on it. The argument's question-begging implication is revealed in the tendentious opposition of the two 'which' clauses: 'which we see' contrasts with 'which exists independent of us'—as if what we see could not exist independently of us.

Perhaps the argument fares better when the first 'which' clause is read as non-defining. So the reasons, set out in the previous section, for thinking it fails the non-defining test must be rebutted.

Would the reference become uncertain if the relative clause were omitted, so that the first co-ordinate clause becomes 'The table seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it'? Turning on the television in the middle of a programme I hear, 'The table, which we see here, was sold to the Marlborough family in 1713'. I gather there is some story I have just missed being related about the table I now see on the screen. I take the clause to be non-defining in presuming that there must have been some previous description identifying what table is being talked about; otherwise identification would have been provided by the relative clause itself, only understood as defining. Now, Hume had in fact introduced in the previous paragraph the table he is talking about: 'This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed … '. But there was no need to start speaking of his example by using a demonstrative—

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or the indefinite article, or by giving some description. While philosophers—notably Moore—sometimes make what they take to be straightforward statements of fact which members of their audience can confirm for themselves about things in their vicinity, generally what is said in examples—whether in philosophical arguments or grammars and dictionaries—is not to be taken as language used in earnest. There is no need to secure any reference, to identify an actual thing, because what is said is intended to be only illustrative of a general point, to be typical of the subject spoken of. Russell starts speaking of 'the cat', although he had not previously mentioned a cat so far in his book.[29] And Hume's sentence, it emerged, is not saying something about some particular table; what it says is meant to apply to any table we might encounter.

While the first co-ordinate clause may be fully intelligible without its relative clause, is not some mention of seeing required? No; moving away from the table precludes maintaining contact with it by touch; and what is described loosely as 'The table' is more accurately the size of the table. Since size is in question, and touch is precluded, only sight remains. The other senses involving perception at a distance need likewise be only implied by the quality that seems to alter. Thus, 'The heat of the fire', 'The volume of the radio', 'The strength of the air freshener' imply, respectively, feeling, hearing and smelling—though they are not expressly mentioned.

The non-defining interpretation, though, is not just a permissible reading: it too is demanded by the argument. For the table regarded solely as seen is not an object purely of sight—unlike its appearance or image. Consider a cloud, rainbow, reflection or shadow: these cannot be observed in any non-visual way. Yet even they are seen as occupying space and so are conceived as bearing some at least imaginable relation to tangible bodies also occupying space. The purely visual is elusive: appearances and images are purely visual objects; yet appearances are of something, and images represent what they are of. Colours are conceived as spread out in, and light as travelling through, space; the most abstract design can be seen as representing tangible shapes in space. Now, a table is only incidentally, not essentially, an object of sight. Even when the table happens to be identified as seen, it could also have been identified independently in some non-visual way. For tables have non-visual properties. Unlike rainbows, they can also be touched, heard groan-

[29] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819106000039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing under weight.

A defining interpretation in general requires some implicit contrast between a table identified as seen and other tables not seen. The universality of Hume's 'we', however, creates another special difficulty. The contrast here has to be between any table in so far as it can be seen and the real table incapable of being seen. The defining interpretation of the clause therefore restricts the scope of its antecedent to any table solely as an object of sight— to an appearance or image of a table. As was noted, the interpretation renders the argument question-begging: so understood the first premise contains the conclusion that what we see when we see any table is only an image of the real table. But to describe something as a table is to describe something that is more than just an object of sight: tables can also be objects of touch or hearing. For this reason the words, 'which we see' demand a non-defining interpretation. It is not essential to any table that it is seen. That the table is seen by us is therefore an additional assertion to the main clause—the mark of a non-defining clause.

The objection to the defining interpretation was that it made the argument beg the question. The objection to the non-defining interpretation is that if something has already been identified as a table before being said to be seen by us, then it is surely a real table—which contradicts the conclusion of the argument. The distinction between 'The table' of the first premise and 'the real table' of the second now becomes obscure rather than question-begging. But on either interpretation the first premise grants that the table is seen. Hence the argument is committed to the existence of something that can have properties other than those detectable by sight. Yet this commitment is inconsistent with the restriction, on the defining interpretation, of the table as seen—in contradistinction to the real table—to a purely visual object. By allowing that the table can without reservation be said to be seen, Hume undermines the whole argument before it begins.

If elegance could ensure coherence of thought, Hume would probably be more upset at being charged with writing a clumsy sentence than with arguing badly. His sentence is like an Escher print.[30] A relative clause must be either defining or non-defining: it cannot be both, or either on the same occasion; just as the stairs returning on themselves in the 'impossible' drawing cannot actually be going

[30] Cf. E. H. Gombrich, 'Illusion and Visual Deadlock' in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, (London and New York: Phaidon, third edition, 1978), 154-157.

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both up and down, or either at the same time. Hence the argument, as Hume presents it, is incoherent.

V

Supposing the ambiguity in the first premise could be resolved, does the argument succeed on either of the two readings? That partly depends on the truth of both premises.

The second premise is uncontentious: real tables, unlike their images depicted on woolly jumpers, do not usually shrink; and any shrinkage is certainly not due to the departure of observers. The difficulty, as ever, is with the first premise. It asserts—however the antecedent of its relative clause is understood—that the table 'seems to diminish' as we move back. But 'in any but the most extraordinary circumstances' it is 'just false', Antony Flew objects, 'in the ordinary senses of the words involved'; because 'our everyday vocabulary of appearance has evolved … for the hesitating and qualified characterization of the public world'.[31] Saying 'seems' would not be right unless one was unsure whether the table had shrunk or thought, or was inclined to think, that it might have; but the assertion of the second premise precludes such doubts or qualifications.

There are more pertinent uses of 'seems'. Most observers surely discount the effect of distance on how big a familiar body looks, usually supposing its actual size remains constant and attributing any change in its appearance rather to themselves in moving. To such observers the table will no longer seem to shrink, if it ever did; for it will not look smaller at a distance. Such learning, or acquisition of perceptual skills, Reid calls '*acquired perception*' (*IP* 211). Whether at a remoter distance a table looks smaller than or still looks the same size as it did at a nearer distance depends on how much one has been affected by experience. In some circumstances it might indeed look to be shrinking—say, if one were hoisted up by a crane at speed high above it; for few are as accustomed to judging the sizes of bodies seen from above, or below, as seen on the same level.[32]

[31] Op. cit. note 10, 268.

[32] Cf. Berkeley, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, § 73; in *The Works of George Berkeley*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948), I, 198-200; and Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, A Critical Edition, The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid*, edited by Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 185 (VI 22).

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In his *New Theory of Vision* Berkeley writes: -

> The apparent magnitude of the moon when placed in the horizon is much greater than when it is in the meridian, though the angle under which the diameter of the moon is seen be not observed greater in the former case than in the latter: And the horizontal moon doth not constantly appear of the same bigness, but at some times seemeth far greater than at others.[33]

How big something may look differs from its visible size as determined by the angle it subtends at the eye. Unlike Berkeley in the above passage, Reid reserves the term 'apparent magnitude' for the latter: 'Supposing two right lines drawn from the eye to the extremities of the object making the angle, of which the object is the subtense, the apparent magnitude is measured by this angle' (*IP* 209-210). Understood thus, the apparent magnitude of the table does diminish as its distance from the eye increases: it is occupying less of the visual field— regardless whether, owing to their experience, it still looks the same size to seasoned observers.

So not disputing the truth of the first premise, Reid objects that the argument turns on an equivocation: the first premise refers to diminution of the apparent magnitude of the table, the second to constancy of its real magnitude. The real magnitude of a body is determined by touch—or in the case of astronomical bodies, which are beyond reach, by calculation. Since variation in the apparent magnitude of the table is perfectly compatible with constancy of its real magnitude, the argument does not establish that the table seen by us is not the real table. Hence it does not prove that we do not see the real table but only its image. Reid declares: 'I admit both the premises in this syllogism, but I deny the conclusion' (*IP* 211). Furthermore, variation in apparent magnitude is not only compatible with but necessitated by constancy in real magnitude. As the apparent magnitude of a body is a function of its distance from the eye, it must vary at different distances from the eye while its real magnitude remains constant. So Reid objects that the argument 'leads to the contrary conclusion' (*IP* 212). In effect his analysis subsumes the argument to the second of the trite topics: the evidence of sight has to be corrected to allow for the effect distance has on apparent magnitude.

Sidgwick is unimpressed that the plain man 'judges of real magnitude from visible appearances' 'through an acquired perception'. He dismisses the distinction between original and acquired percep-

[33] § 67 (I, 196).

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tion as 'weak … which the progress of science has rendered clearly untenable and irrelevant'. Instead he asks how we could 'ever know that there exists a real table which does not alter while the visible appearance changes with its distance from us' if 'nothing but images were present to the mind'. In other words, assertion of the second premise betrays knowledge of the real table. Moreover, 'coherent, precise and unerring prediction' of 'what appearance a given portion of extended matter will exhibit at any given distance' assumes 'the vulgar belief in the independent existence of … matter'.[34] As Reid himself puts it, 'the rules of geometry and perspective' (*IP* 212) 'are built on the supposition that the objects of sight are external' adding 'that upon the contrary hypothesis, to wit, that the objects of sight are internal, no account can be given of any one of those appearances' (*IP* 213). Flew objects that because the argument 'should be taken not as a lonesome individual but as representative of a vast class … one of innumerable tokens … nowadays labelled *The Argument from Illusion*', Reid was 'most extraordinarily wrong' in concluding that he had disposed of the doctrine that the senses present only images of external things.[35] Flew forgets that arguments based on facts of illusion betray knowledge that they are illusions and so betray knowledge of external reality.

How, then, does Reid understand the first 'which' clause? If the clause is non-defining it can be dropped without changing the scope of the antecedent—one could just say 'The table seems … '. But since Reid's rejoinder turns on distinguishing the size of the table considered as an object of sight from its size as determined by touch, he doubtless assumed that the scope of the antecedent must be limited by its clause. Despite not being entirely faithful in his initial quotation to the punctuation of the sentence, he does retain there the comma after the antecedent of the first 'which' clause (*IP* 206). But in his restatement of the argument he begins: 'The table which we see, seems … ' (*IP* 209); and in his analysis he writes 'the table we see seems … ' (*IP* 211). Omission of the comma after the antecedent in the former is only suggestive; but elision of the relative pronoun in the latter establishes that he takes the clause to be defining. The phrase he uses later, 'the table we see' (*IP* 212)—with its elision of the relative pronoun—should be distinguished from words he uses thrice, 'it is the real table we see' (*IP* 211, 212); for while the relative pronoun is elided in both, the second clause is part of a cleft construction. On elimination of the cleft construction, 'it

[34] Henry Sidgwick, 'The Philosophy of Common Sense', *Mind*, 4, (1895), 156.

[35] Op. cit. note 18, 352.

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is the real table we see' becomes 'we see the real table'.

The problem with the defining interpretation was that the argument became question-begging. Why, then, does Reid reject the argument, not for this reason, but instead for being equivocal? On his analysis there are not two tables, the table as an object purely of sight and the real table; instead, the argument is 'confounding real magnitude with apparent magnitude' (*IP* 212). He speaks of these as 'two middle terms', glossing the first premise as 'its apparent magnitude is diminished' (*IP* 211). The premises are better understood as 'The size of the table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it' and 'but the size of the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration'. The phrases, 'The size of the table, which we see' and 'the size of the real table'—like the parallel examples given earlier, 'The heat of the fire', 'The volume of the radio' and 'The strength of the air freshener'—conceal interrogative clauses: namely, how big the table looks; how big it feels; how hot the fire feels; how loud the radio sounds; and how strong the air freshener smells. The argument was intended by 'philosophy' to distinguish two kinds of table each with their individual sizes. Wright, recall, thinks it 'shows the non-identity of two objects, by showing that the one has a property which the other does not have'.[36] Yet however the antecedent of the first 'which' clause is understood, the opposition of the table seen by us to the real table does not establish that there is more than one kind of object. All the argument shows is that there are two kinds of size, the size it looks and the size it really is, of just one object.

If the subject of the main clause is taken as 'The table', and the relative clause understood as defining, the premise would already have covertly distinguished two kinds of objects—the table we see from the real table—thereby anticipating the conclusion of the argument. Once the true subject is recognised as being 'The size of the table', not only is there no question-begging implication that what we see is distinct from the real table, the relative clause need not even be taken as defining. For as was argued earlier, visible size is implicit in moving back; so the clause can simply be dropped. When it is, there is even less inclination to suppose there is more than one table. If apparent magnitude is expressly mentioned, as in Reid's analysis, however, 'seems' is out of place—as also if 'The visible appearance of the table' is taken as the subject.

Reid's declaration that he accepts both premises of the argument is disputed by Wright. He objects: 'what Reid is doing is to deny the

[36] Op. cit. note 11, 52.

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second premise of Hume's argument'—namely, 'that the real independent object undergoes no change'. He supposes that the second premise 'would exclude the change in apparent size that Reid would ascribe to the independent object'. He argues that 'the real and independent object' would 'undergo a change here' if there were 'a change in apparent magnitude'. It 'would be a change in an *extrinsic* or relative property of that object', whereas 'the object which we see undergoes a change in an *intrinsic* property'; therefore, 'the object we see cannot be the real and independent object'.[37]

The apparent magnitude of a body as determined by the angle it subtends at the eye is related mathematically to its real magnitude. A man might become an uncle at the time he becomes a widower; but even if he—as distinct from the relations he has to others—could be said to change, the two changes he would undergo are compatible. If Wright is correct, the real table is undergoing an infinite number of changes perpetually and simultaneously, only some of which are compatible. A change in a body's apparent magnitude constitutes a change in the location it is viewed from, not in the body itself. Tritely, an apparent change need not be a real change. Neither a change in its apparent magnitude necessitates the body itself really changing in some way nor no change in the body precludes a change in its apparent magnitude—precludes, that is, the body's apparently changing. For the purpose of saying that its apparent magnitude changes is to allow the possibility that its real magnitude remains unchanged.

Wright takes this talk of the apparent magnitude of bodies—as when Reid speaks of 'that apparent magnitude which … the real table must have' (*IP* 212)—as if it were about them, not the observer. Instead of a change in their apparent magnitude being only an apparent change in them resulting from a real change in the location of the observer, he takes it to be a real change in them—or, as he puts it, 'a change in an *extrinsic* or relative property' of them. Perhaps he has also been misled by Reid's wording of his inference from his supposition, contrary to the conclusion of the argument in Hume, that we see the real table. Reid argues: -

> When that which must happen to the real table, as we remove farther from it, does actually happen to the table we see, it is absurd to conclude from this, that it is not the real table we see. [IP 212]

As his two preceding sentences indicate, what happens to the real

[37] Op. cit. note 11, 81, n. 20. In his quotation Wright has 'move' for Reid's 'remove'.

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table as we depart is that it must 'seem to diminish'; but 'this apparent diminution' (*IP* 211) that happens to it is not a real change it undergoes. Finally, since 'philosophy'—and Hume too, Wright supposes—teaches that the table as seen is a representation of the real table, an '*intrinsic*' change in the former would, if Wright's objection were sound, represent an '*extrinsic* or relative' change in the latter, which, Wright is urging, is contrary to the second premise.

A more serious objection is that Reid's rejoinder rests on the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*, of arguing for the irrelevant conclusion that the real table that is seen is the table as determined by touch. For the real table, according to 'philosophy', is as distinct from the table as felt as from the table as seen. Hume speaks not only of the table 'which we see white' but also the table 'which we feel hard'. Unlike Hume's, Russell's table is brown—though 'some parts look white'; but Russell faithfully imparts the teachings of 'philosophy' when he declares, 'the real table, if there is one, is not the same as what we immediately experience by sight or touch or hearing'.[38] Reid travels much of the way with 'philosophy' in respect of sight, as emerges from his explicit use of the term 'represent' in his chapter, 'Of Seeing' in his *Inquiry*: visible figure 'is truly extended in length and breadth, and … represents a figure that is extended in length, breadth, and thickness'; 'those figures and that extension which are the immediate objects of sight, are not the figures and the extension about which common geometry is employed'; 'the geometrician … does not consider, that the visible figure presented to his eye, is only the representative of a tangible figure'; visible figure 'hath in all cases such a similitude to the thing signified by it, as a plan or profile hath to that which it represents'. But unlike 'philosophy', Reid also teaches that we see the real table too, which is the table as determined by touch. So he also affirms in his *Inquiry*: 'We take it for granted, that the objects both of sight and touch, are external', presupposing that 'we learn to perceive so many things by the eye, which originally could be perceived only by touch'.[39] In general, when we see, hear, smell and taste a thing, we see, hear, smell and taste the real thing because what we see, hear, smell and taste is the tangible thing. But 'philosophy' disputes that the tangible thing is the real thing.

On the purely logical point the objection is sound. Still, 'philosophy' requires some additional argument to show that the tangible thing is not the real thing. For arguments like the one about

[38] Op. cit. note 29, 2, 3.

[39] Op. cit. note 32: 98 (VI 8), 105 (VI 9), 102-103 (VI 8), 106 (VI 9), 119 (VI 11), 178 (VI 21).

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the table cannot apply to touch, whose objects are not at a distance—with the exception of radiated heat. If, as in the argument about the table that is seen, the tangible thing is being implicitly contrasted with the real thing, this argument too will beg the question. Besides, a distinction between the thing as presented to the senses generally and the real thing smacks of the metaphysical.

What of the non-defining interpretation? Here the clause would serve as a reminder, as its counterpart in the second premise does. It would reiterate that the table's seeming is a matter of its looking. For with the relative clause dropped, the first premise becomes: 'The table seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it'. As the context indicates that the size of the table seen from a distance is meant, 'seems' can be understood only as 'looks', not as expressing a hesitant or qualified judgment.

Suppose the table did look to be shrinking to some grossly inexperienced observer. The simple criticism of the argument now is that the premise so understood is fully compatible with the table's not really shrinking. If 'seems' or 'looks' is emphasised, the clear implication is that it is not really but only seems or looks to be shrinking. Indeed, the second premise in asserting that the real table does not alter concedes the point in effect. So the conclusion that the table seeming or looking to be shrinking is not the real table, only its image, does not follow. The 'seems' is needed in the first premise because neither the table nor the real table—supposing there were any difference between them—is really shrinking. What is really shrinking is the image of the table relative to the field of view; but the image of the table, as is implied in the argument itself, is neither the table nor the real table.

In general, the argument tries to drive a wedge between the table and the real table, the real table being opposed to its image. The aim is to establish that when we see the table we see only the image of the real table. On either interpretation of the first premise it asserts that we see the table: as an independent assertion on the non-defining interpretation, and as a restriction on the antecedent, 'The table' on the defining interpretation. The wedge, then, would make our seeing the table distinct from our seeing the real table. But unless the question whether we see the real table as opposed to its image is simply begged, given that we do see the table, it cannot be the case that we see only the image of the real table. The conclusion that actually follows is the opposite to the one drawn by 'philosophy': in seeing the table we see the real table and not just the image of the real table. Since the valid move is from seeing the table to seeing the real table, as opposed to its image, there is no wedge to be driven.

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Besides, surely seeing an image of a table is possible only if—usually at other times—a real table could be seen. But leaving that aside, a short way of saying what is wrong with the argument is that it is committed to the inconsistent conjunction: both the table is seen and only its image is seen.

VI

The wording of the premises of the argument resembles the conclusion drawn in section 9 of the Fourth Dialogue of Berkeley's *Alciphron* about seeing a castle in the distance or a planet or cloud in the sky. Berkeley's mouthpiece Euphranor asks the leading question: 'Is it not plain, therefore, that neither the castle, the planet, nor the cloud, which you see here, are those real ones which you suppose exist at a distance?'.[40] Notwithstanding the punctuation, the first relative clause with its complex antecedent, 'neither the castle, the planet, nor the cloud' can only be defining. The qualification 'here' restricts the scope of the antecedent to what appears to sight at some location different from that of the things in the distance. If the clause were non-defining, it could be dropped; yet its omission renders obscure what is being denied to be the real castle, planet or cloud—namely, the ones seen here as distinct from the ones at a distance. The sentence in Hume, by contrast, does not simply deny that the table which we see is the real table; it also says something else about it—namely, that it 'seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it', thus identifying the seemingly diminishing table as what is being denied to be the real table even when the relative clause, 'which we see' is omitted.

Berkeley's argument answers to what Wright supposed was the general form of the argument in Hume, a form it too was doubtless meant to have. Euphranor had argued that 'the very object which you strictly and properly perceive by sight is not that thing which is several miles distant'. Pressed by Alciphron to explain, Euphranor had said: 'Because a little round object is one thing, and a great square object is another'. For at the distance they are from the castle, 'it seems only a small round tower'. They then agree that 'the visible appearance alone' is 'the proper object of sight'. Euphranor is arguing for, in Wright's words, 'the non-identity of two objects'. In Berkeley's argument the unwarranted step is from the castle's

[40] *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, IV 9; in *The Works of George Berkeley*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1950), III, 154.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819106000039 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seeming to be 'only a small round tower', which is quite compatible with its being really 'a large square building with battlements and turrets', to 'the very object which you strictly and properly perceive by sight' being 'a little round object'.[41]

Berkeley has thus simply denied that things at a distance are seen—or at least, 'strictly and properly'. Indeed, in § 12 it is expressly stated that things at a distance, which are styled 'the secondary objects', 'are not seen'; that 'the proper objects of sight … alone are seen'[42]—that is, visible appearances. The tangles Hume gets into Berkeley evades by refusing to allow that things like tables are in any unqualified sense seen. There is no question for him to be begged whether the table capable of being seen by us is distinct from the real table, because we can never see any table; nor does any question arise for him whether the table when it seems to diminish is purely an object of sight or an object of the other senses too, because it is not a proper object of sight at all. Hence there is no ambiguity in his sentence: there is no implication that what is seen here is anything other than solely the visible appearance of the thing at a distance; whereas the first premise of the argument in Hume implies that the table seen by us, as distinct from the real table, both is and is not solely an object of sight.

Since Reid's rejoinder relies on the presupposition—which Berkeley would deny—of the first premise, on either of its two interpretations, that we unreservedly see the table, it is powerless against Berkeley. In one way Berkeley stands, ironically, on firmer ground: he does not compromise his philosophical position by attempting to produce an argument for it. Yet he still has to use words like 'castle', 'planet' and 'cloud' in order to identify the proper object of sight in question even as he denies that castles, planets or clouds are themselves seen. His position is no more secure than that argued for unsuccessfully by Hume on behalf of 'philosophy'. For the reference Berkeley is obliged to make to objects other than proper objects of sight betrays knowledge of them, just as the second premise of the argument in Hume betrays knowledge of the real table. Such philosophical positions, as also later doctrines about sense-impressions and sense-data, are so systematically undermined by the knowledge presupposed in everyday ways of speaking that they resist coherent and consistent formulation.

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[41] The Berkeley quotations are from *Alciphron*, IV 9 (III, 153).
[42] *Alciphron*, IV 12 (III, 156).

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