

# **PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM**

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An introduction

Reinhardt Grossmann

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PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM

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An introduction

REINHARDT GROSSMANN

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# *Phenomenology and existentialism*

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## An introduction

Reinhardt Grossmann



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# Preface

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This book is based on lectures which I have given for the last ten years or so. This explains its style. Some other features, I think, require a little more explanation.

Different philosophers have quite different conceptions of what philosophy is all about. I am no exception, and my particular conception of philosophy has shaped my treatment of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. In brief, I believe that all important philosophers—whether they know it or not, and whether they admit it or not—deal with certain traditional problems. There is a, sometimes hidden, continuity to philosophy. No matter how revolutionary a philosophical movement may at first appear to be, and Phenomenology and Existentialism certainly claimed to be revolutionary, a closer look reveals that the same old problems are merely discussed in a new way. I selected three such problems: the problem of knowledge, the problem of existence, and the problem of freedom—in order to provide some focus to the discussion, and because I believe that they were of major concern to Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, respectively.

But philosophical books are written, not only with a definite conception of philosophy in mind, but also from a particular point of philosophical view. My philosophical view is not easily described in contemporary terms. Although I was schooled in what is now called the ‘analytic’ tradition, I was also taught to appreciate Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Scotus, Descartes and Berkeley. I hope to show with this book that one so schooled can appreciate Heidegger and Sartre as well. It is surely silly to assume that only an Existentialist, say, can understand another Existentialist; as silly, I might add, as to believe that all Existentialists talk nonsense.

Finally, there is the fact that I argue, rather vehemently at times, for my own philosophical view. This will undoubtedly offend those who believe that an introductory text should present an unbiased picture. In defense of my polemical style, I can only plead that I find it very difficult to develop the dialectic of a particular problem—the arguments and counter-arguments, the choices and limitations—without taking a definite stand myself. I assure the reader that I sound much more dogmatic than I am. And I invite him to develop the arguments further than I have done, refuting my contentions in the process. This is the very stuff of which philosophy is made.

It goes without saying that Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre have thought and written about things other than knowledge, existence and freedom. Just as it is obvious that there are other Phenomenologists and Existentialists. After all, this is merely an introduction to, not a survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism. My main criticism of most of the introductions and anthologies in this field is that they contain bits and pieces from numerous sources from Dostojewski to Marcel without ever following up on any one topic, with the result that the student cannot possibly appreciate the complexity of the issues, or be impressed by the manner in which philosophical problems grow out of each other.

While writing this book, I consulted many times with my colleague Paul Spade, who taught a similar course in the department. I would like to thank him for sharing with me his knowledge of and enthusiasm for some of the more notorious philosophers of our time.



## *The background*

# 1. Descartes: a new conception of the mind

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## (1) *The traditional distinction between substance, essence and accident*

In order to understand the fundamental ideas of phenomenologists and existentialists, we must consider their origins. René Descartes' (1596–1650) philosophy is the source of many of the problems which led to the development of various philosophical movements during the last three hundred years. Phenomenology and Existentialism are no exceptions. Descartes was a modern philosopher. His proposed views contrary to those of the tradition; views which still influence the thought of contemporary philosophers. But he was also steeped in the very tradition which he opposed. He had, it were, one foot in the tradition and one foot in a new era of philosophy. We consider him to be the father of modern philosophy.

The tradition I am speaking of consisted of the Scholastic philosophy of Descartes' time. It consisted of a most complicated, most elaborate, most comprehensive system of ideas going back to St Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274) and, ultimately, to Aristotle (384/3–322 B.C.). You may compare it to a most complex Rube Goldberg-type contraption fashioned from Tinker Toys. Descartes, to start with this picture, thought that this towering edifice needed a slight adjustment. He removed one of the parts and replaced it by another. As it turned out, the replaced part was crucial to the structure. Without it, the whole structure collapsed. The history of philosophy since Descartes can be viewed as consisting of various attempts to erect a new comprehensive system which incorporates some of Descartes' views.

According to the tradition, everything there is can be divided into two basic categories of things called 'substances' and 'accidents', respectively. These are the traditional terms, but I shall sometimes adopt a more modern terminology and speak of *individual things* and their *accidental properties*. Everything there is, then, is either an individual thing or else an accidental property of an individual thing. Examples of individual things are: a hair on Napoleon's head, the sun, the Tower of London, Socrates, and the typewriter I am using. Examples of accidental properties are: the color of Napoleon's hair, the mass of the sun, the height of the Tower of London, Socrates' sense of humor, and the shape of my typewriter. Substances are distinguished from accidents, according to the tradition, by the fact that they are *independent existents*. They are not dependent for their existence on accidents, while accidents can only exist as accidents of substances.

A material substance is conceived of by the tradition as a composite of *matter* and *essence*. The matter of a material thing is some sort of formless stuff. This undifferentiated stuff receives its structure from the essence. The essence is the feature, characteristic, or property which is responsible for the fact that some matter is Napoleon's hair, while other matter is the sun. In a way, the essence of a material substance is a property of that substance, and I shall often speak of essential, as opposed to accidental, properties. But we must keep in mind that this property is much more intimately connected with the substance than its accidental properties are. It is, in a sense, a *part* of the substance and not merely added on to it from the outside like an accident is. From this point of view, one may say that a substance has two kinds of property, essential and accidental properties. The essential property is pa

and parcel of the substance itself; it determines the inner structure of the substance. The accidental properties, on the other hand, are added on to the whole, compromised of matter and essence, in such way that the substance would still be what it is, this particular kind of thing rather than that one without the accidental properties. I realize that I am not too precise, and I apologize. But the view I am trying to describe is simply not very clear. In particular, it has difficulties in making a sharp distinction between the essential and the accidental properties of substances, and it is rather vague both on the nature of the relationship between substance and essence, and on the quite different relationship between substance and accident. Or perhaps I should say that within the tradition, there are several versions of how these things are to be understood.

In terms of these traditional distinctions, we can now describe the small piece in the monument of the Tinker Toy structure which Descartes replaced. A human being, according to the tradition, consists of a body and a soul. And now comes the crucial point: *The soul is conceived of as the essence of the body*. The relationship between a human being and his soul (mind, spirit) is the relationship between a substance and its essence. (This essence, it was stressed, can exist separated from the body.) According to Descartes, on the contrary, the mind is conceived of, not as the essence of the body, but as a substance in its own right. A human being, according to Descartes, is thus a combination of two individual things, namely, of a body and a mind. The relationship between body and mind is, not the relationship between substance and its essence, but a relationship between two substances. Each one of these two substances, consequently, must have its own essence, the mind just as much as the human body. Descartes' innovation consists in his claim that minds are individual things (substances) and not essences of individual things.

## (2) *Descartes' distinction between bodies and minds*

According to Descartes' new philosophy, there are three kinds of individual thing: one kind uncreated and two kinds created. The uncreated individual is God. The two created kinds are bodies and minds. Every individual (other than God) is either a body or a mind. Of course, there are many bodies which are not combined with minds. My typewriter is one of them. Curiously, Descartes held the rather absurd view that animals are mere bodies, comparable, say, to complicated pinball machines, rather than combinations of bodies with (rudimentary) minds. There are also, presumably, minds which are not combined with bodies. Angels are of this sort.

Descartes did more than just claim that minds are substances, he also told us how they differ from bodies. Bodies have an essential property that distinguishes them from minds. This property is *extension*. Minds, on the other hand, share an essential property which all bodies lack. This property is *thought*. Bodies and only bodies are extended. This means that they and only they have a shape, that they and only they are located in space. Minds have no shapes. Nor do they exist somewhere in space. My typewriter, for example, has a certain shape, a shape hard to describe other than by saying it is the shape of an old typewriter. It is also located on my desk, and the desk is in my office, and my office is in a certain building, and the building is in Bloomington, and Bloomington is so many miles south of Indianapolis. Minds, as I said, are different in this respect from bodies. They are, quite literally, nowhere. My mind is not square; nor does it have any other shape. And it is not located so many inches above my shoulder, in this room, in Bloomington, south of Indianapolis.

But is this really true? Is my mind not located in my head rather than in one of my big toes? Descartes would answer, I think, that we are tempted to locate our minds where our brains rather than our toes are because we have learned from experience that changes in our brains rather than in our toes cause changes in our minds. If the amputation of a big toe would inevitably cause a cessation of a

mental processes, we would be inclined to locate the mind in the toe rather than in the head. We do not observe minds in space. Our inclination to think of them as being located in heads is due to two factors. Firstly, brains are literally located in heads. Secondly, changes in the brain (in the nervous system) cause changes in the mental processes. It remains, therefore, true that minds, in contrast to brains, are not literally located anywhere.

Bodies are spatial. Minds think. What does Descartes mean, precisely, by defining minds as thinking substances? Here is one of his explanations: ‘What is a thinking being? It is a being which doubts, which understands, which conceives, which affirms, which denies, which wills, which rejects, which imagines also, and which perceives’ (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second Meditation). Thinking, it is clear, is for Descartes a very general mental activity. It encompasses such quite different mental phenomena as conceiving, willing, imagining, and perceiving. I shall anticipate some later terminological needs and introduce another technical term. I shall speak of *mental acts* of conceiving, of mental acts of willing, mental acts of imagining, etc. Thought, then, consists of various mental acts. Descartes lists only a very select group of mental acts, a fact which will occupy us later. But we should notice that he leaves out emotions, and he omits remembering, desiring, questioning, and many other kinds of mental act. If we add these kinds to our inventory of mental acts, we can say that a mind is an individual which has mental acts like desiring, perceiving, hating, fearing, affirming, remembering, imagining, etc.

Bodies have shapes and are at places, but they do not perceive, desire, etc. Minds do all of these things, but they are not spatial. Descartes does not mention it, but there is also a ‘glue’ that binds the two realms together. This glue is *time*. Bodies as well as minds are temporal things. Both kinds of individual are in time. Bodies and minds have durations, and they are also temporally located, that is, they stand in temporal relations to each other. Caesar’s body existed *before* Napoleon’s. But Caesar’s thoughts also occurred *before* Napoleon’s. And Caesar made certain plans *while* (at the time when) Napoleon’s (his body) crossed the Rubicon. Bodily and mental processes are both in time. One may occur earlier than the other, or later, or simultaneous with the other. To repeat, time is the glue of the universe.

Descartes’ new conception of minds as totally different individual things from bodies has profound consequences for the rest of the Scholastic system. It does not jibe with other parts of the system or, at least, it brings into sharp focus longstanding shortcomings of the traditional view. This is the reason why the whole edifice comes tumbling down. In particular, it poses two important philosophical problems: the problem of the causal interaction between mind and body and the problem of representation by ideas. We shall briefly explain these problems in the next two sections.

### (3) *The problem of causal interaction*

According to Descartes, bodies and minds are essentially different. They do not exist together in the same space as two billiard balls do. Yet Descartes also insists that body and mind interact with each other. For example, our ideas of external bodies are caused by these bodies. But how can a body, either the external body of the perceived object or the brain itself, act upon something which is not even in space? How can a change in the properties of a brain cause a change in the essentially different properties of the mind? To Cartesians, the interaction was a fact, but a fact that posed a mystery.

Two views clash at this point. There is, on the one hand, the new Cartesian conception of the mind as a thinking, non-spatial, substance. There is, on the other, an old notion of causality at work. According to this notion, the paradigm of a causal interaction is the bumping between two billiard balls or the pulling of an object by a string. I shall call this the ‘push-pull model of causality’. It is clear that this model cannot be applied to body and mind. A body can neither push a mind nor pull it.



It cannot touch it, bump into it, or hit it. Hence, on this model, a body cannot causally interact with mind. ~~But such causal interaction is a fact. Something, obviously, has to give. It is fair to say that~~ most Cartesians simply knew no way out of this dilemma. Some boldly declared that causal interaction between body and mind is a matter which cannot be explained by reason, but only by faith. Others felt forced to deny that interaction ever takes place. Our ideas are not in our minds, caused by external objects, they held, but are in God.

Eventually, the issue was resolved—as resolved as any issue ever can be in philosophy—by David Hume's (1711–76) introduction of a new conception of causality (See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, 1967.) The old push-pull model was abandoned in favor of the notion of causality as a constant conjunction of events. Speaking most generally, the notion of cause supplanted in modern science by the notion of *lawfulness*. This is not a topic which we can take up in this context, but I shall hint at what is at stake for future reference.

It is clear that changes in the nervous system of a person, in his brain, cause changes in his mental life. A prefrontal lobotomy, for example, will make a person docile, unemotional, and slow down his mental processes. These facts are investigated by a great number of physiologists, chemists, and psychiatrists. But these scientists do not search for direct action by a brain on a mind in analogy with two billiard balls hitting each other. Rather, they look for laws which will connect changes in the brain with changes in the mind. Such a law may be of the following kind: *whenever* you stimulate a certain region of the brain with electrical impulses, then the subject of the experiment will see a red flash before his eyes. Or it may be of this sort: *whenever* a person dreams, *then* his eyes will make certain rapid movements. A law of this sort is of the form: whenever such-and-such changes take place in the nervous system of a person, then (simultaneously or some time later) such-and-such changes will take place in his mental processes. As you can see, all that is asserted is a certain regular connection between bodily processes and mental processes. No pushing or shoving is envisaged. As you can also see, the Cartesian mind-body dualism is perfectly compatible with this modern conception of causality as lawfulness.

#### (4) *The problem of representation by ideas*

The second main problem of the Cartesian philosophy arises because Descartes' insistence that body and mind are essentially different clashes with the Scholastic conception of knowledge in general and of perception in particular. According to this conception, as we have seen, a material substance is composed of an essence and of matter. The essence determines what kind of material thing it is. It is thought of as a principle of organization. In addition to its essence, an individual also has numerous accidental properties. Now comes the important point. When a human being knows, that is, perceives a material object, the essence of the object is supposed to exist in his mind. The perceiver and the perceived object share a common property, namely, the essential property of the perceived object. Or, and the same thing, the essence of the object, exists in the material world, as the essence which informs this piece of matter, and also in the mind of the perceiver, as a concept of this object.

How does the essence get into the mind? The process is supposedly very complicated. The material object, through a medium, somehow causes a material impression on the sense organ. This impression causes a material image. Then the active part of the mind goes to work on this image and extracts from it the essence of the perceived object. Fortunately, we need not bother trying to understand the process in detail. What matters for our purpose is, firstly, that in perception the essence of the perceived object is quite literally in the mind of the perceiver; and, secondly, that therefore the mind and the object share a common property.

Recall now Descartes' insistence that body and mind are essentially different. It is clear that Descartes' view does not agree with the Scholastic account which we have just outlined. Since body and mind are radically different, they could not possibly share a common property, as required by the Scholastic account of perception. Body and mind have absolutely nothing in common and, hence, could not possibly share the essence of the perceived object. Let us agree to call the essence *as it exists in the mind of the perceiver* a 'notion' of the perceived object. In this terminology, Descartes' philosophy has no room for notions. Knowledge of the perceptual object cannot be by means of a *notion*. It must be by way of *idea*. When you perceive an elephant, then there exists in your mind, according to the Cartesian, the idea of this elephant. How this idea arises in your mind is again a complicated process. The physical part of this process, the stimulation of the sense organ and the transmission of this stimulation to the brain, is viewed in mechanical terms. How the mechanical changes in the brain give rise to the idea is, as we noted in the last section, a serious problem for Descartes. But no matter how the idea may be caused, this idea is not the essence of the perceived elephant. This idea, according to Descartes, is not even *like* the elephant. How, then, can it possibly *represent* an elephant?

Let us approach this problem from another angle. The Scholastic and the Cartesian agree that the perceived object is somehow 'in' the perceiving mind. Both hold that something in the mind corresponds to the perceived object. According to the Scholastic, this something is a notion; according to Descartes, it is an idea. How is this mental entity related to the elephant? The Scholastic has an answer at hand, unsatisfactory as it may turn out to be in the long run. The notion of the elephant is the essence of this elephant, as it exists in the mind. The Cartesian, on the other hand, has no ready answer. The idea of the elephant is not the same as its essence. The idea is a property of a thinking substance, while the essence is a property of an extended substance. The idea cannot even be *alike* or *similar* to the essence of the elephant. Since body and mind have nothing in common, how could they be alike or similar?

The problem of how ideas represent, just like the problem of how body and mind interact, was never solved by the Cartesians. But it had to wait even longer for a solution than the problem of causal interaction. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that Franz Brentano (1838–1917) and his students seriously took up the question once again of how ideas represent their objects. One of Brentano's students was Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of phenomenology.

### *(5) The distinction between ideas and sensations*

In addition to ideas, minds have other modifications called 'sensations'. But these modifications, according to the Cartesian, do not represent anything. They are not, like ideas, *of* anything. They are, unlike ideas, have no objects. They are caused in the mind, it is true, but they do not convey knowledge of the external world. Examples of sensations are colors, odors, tastes, sounds, tactile feelings, heat, cold, etc. Examples of sensations are, as you may notice with some surprise, all sensory properties of objects, all the properties of the objects around us which we can perceive by means of our eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and hands. I shall call these properties from now on 'perceptual properties'. In the Cartesian tradition, these properties are sometimes called 'secondary qualities' (or 'perceptual objects'). But this terminology is misleading. According to the Cartesian, these so-called secondary qualities are not qualities of perceptual objects at all: they are mere sensations in the mind.

Secondary qualities are contrasted with primary qualities. Examples of primary qualities mentioned by Descartes are: size, shape, number, and motion and rest. Material substances have these and only these properties. What is 'out there' in the way of material substance has a certain size, a shape, and

is in motion or at rest. But it is not red or green, it has no taste, it is neither hot nor cold, etc. It is the primary qualities which are supposed to be known by way of ideas. Ideas are said to represent the qualities. According to this distinction between primary and secondary qualities, we have ideas of shapes, but we do not have ideas of colors. Shapes are properties of material objects; colors are only sensations in a mind.

You can hardly fail to see how doubtful this distinction between shape and color really is. Not only is it doubtful, but it leads almost immediately to the rather absurd view that there are no material objects at all. George Berkeley (1685–1753), not too long after Descartes, came to precisely this conclusion. He pounced on Descartes' admission that colors are only sensations in minds and argued that whatever speaks for this admission also shows that shape (as well as size, number, and motion and rest) is only a sensation in the mind. Thus all qualities, primary as well as secondary qualities, are only sensations in the mind. But if all of the alleged properties of material objects are not properties of such objects at all, what sense can it make to speak of the things which have these properties, that is, of the material objects themselves? All there are, according to Berkeley, are these sensations in minds, and what we ordinarily think of as perceptual objects—an apple, for example—are nothing but bundles of such sensations. In this perfectly straightforward and lucid fashion, Berkeley comes to the surprising conclusion that houses, mountains, rivers and all other perceptual objects have an existence only in the mind.

But, of course, houses, mountains, rivers, and trees do not exist in our minds. And if Descartes' distinction between primary and secondary qualities, between ideas and sensations, leads to Berkeley's conclusion, then we must take a critical look at the reasons for the distinction. I think there are three main reasons which explain why Descartes as well as many later philosophers and scientists have clung to the view that colors 'are only in the mind', while certain other properties 'are truly out there'.

The first reason consists in what I shall call—tongue in cheek, to be sure—'the scientist's fallacy'. This logical howler is committed by some scientists when they do not carefully watch what they are saying and by many philosophers when they deliberately obfuscate the issues. The general line of reasoning is as follows. One asserts that, say, objective colors are nothing but reflected light waves (of a certain length). 'Out there', then, are only light waves. Where does that leave the colors as we literally see them with our eyes? Well, if they are not 'out there', then they must be in the mind. Colors, *as we see them* literally with our eyes, are mere sensations in our minds. Now, the particular fallacy I have in mind occurs at the beginning of this line of thought, when one asserts that colors are nothing but reflected light waves. What the scientist really discovers is a most surprising law: differently colored surfaces reflect light waves of different lengths in such a fashion that to different colors there correspond different wave lengths. It is this law from which one then concludes fallaciously, that colors are nothing but light waves. Consider another example. We have also discovered that the hotter a fluid or gas is, the faster its molecules move. From this perfectly astounding law, one concludes, again fallaciously, that heat is nothing but molecular motion. And here is still another example: from the fact that whenever there is lightning, then there is an electrical discharge, one concludes that lightning is nothing but an electrical discharge.

There is a pattern to this logical mistake. In each case, the scientist discovers a law of the form: whenever something has a certain property,  $P$ , then it has the property  $Q$ , and conversely. For example, whenever a surface is olive green, then it reflects light of a certain wave length, and conversely; or whenever a gas has a certain temperature, then its molecules move with a certain velocity, and conversely. And from this law, one concludes without further ado that the property  $P$

*nothing but* the property  $Q$ . For example, one concludes that olive green is nothing but a certain wavelength; that a certain temperature is nothing but molecular motion of a certain sort. But it is obvious that one cannot conclude from the fact that two properties go hand in hand, so to speak, that therefore the one property is really the other. Perhaps the extent of this logical mistake can be illustrated by the following hypothetical case. Assume that everything olive green in the universe is square, and conversely. Assume, in other words, that olive green and square go hand in hand, as I just put it. Does it follow that there is no such color as olive green, but only the property of being square? Obviously not. This example shows that the illogical scientist has a curious prejudice. I could have asked rhetorically, does it follow that there is no property of being square, but only the color olive green? One may just as well mistakenly conclude that light waves are nothing but colors as that colors are nothing but light waves, or that molecular motion is nothing but heat as that heat is nothing but molecular motion.

The second reason for holding that colors as perceived are only sensations in the mind also derives from modern science. It rests on the twin discoveries that material objects consist of elementary particles and that such particles are not colored. Descartes knew nothing of positrons, of course, but he, too, thought of material objects as consisting of smaller and smaller bodies. And he, too, believed that these smaller bodies had no colors. But let us stick to the more modern version of physics for our example. Elementary particles, we are told, have a number of properties—for example, they have mass, electrical charge, and a number of very esoteric properties like spin—but they are not colored. Furthermore, ordinary perceptual objects like apples consist of elementary particles. From these two facts, one concludes that apples cannot be colored. Colors, therefore, are only in minds.

In this case, the crucial argument is of the following form: (1) An apple consists of elementary particles; it is a complicated structure of such particles; (2) elementary particles have no color. Therefore, an apple has no color. It is not hard to see that the conclusion does not follow from the two facts (1) and (2). One needs another premise, another assumption. Let us insert the following principle: (3) a structure (a whole) can only have those properties which its constituents (its parts) have. Now, from (1), (2), and (3) it follows indeed that apples cannot be colored. The logic of our argument is sound. But assumption (3) is quite obviously false. Take the most simple counterexample. Imagine a square with the two diagonal lines drawn. This square consists of four triangles, but it has the shape square. It has a shape, in other words, which none of its spatial parts has. Or consider the apple of our example. An apple is not an elementary particle. Rather, it is a complicated structure of such particles. Why, then, should it not have properties which elementary particles do not have? Surely, I can take a healthy bite out of the apple, but I cannot take a healthy bite out of an elementary particle! Just the opposite of principle (3) is true: a structure has many properties which its parts do not have. This disposes of the second reason for believing that colors are only in minds.

The third reason is rather complicated and of a more philosophical nature. Assume that you look at the rectangular top of a desk from different angles. What you see from these different angles, according to the argument, are different shapes of the top. For example, from several feet away and at an angle from six feet down, you will see a trapezoidal shaped desk top. From directly above, suspended from the ceiling, on the other hand, you will see a rectangular top. And so on. Now, even if one of these perspectives is equally 'correct', equally 'normal', equally 'standard'. But if this is so, then what is the true shape of the desk top? Is it the trapezoidal shape, or the rectangular shape, or some other shape? One concludes that we have no reason to ascribe one of these shapes rather than any other to the desk top. And from this result, one concludes further that the desk top has no shape at all, that shape is not one of its properties. Of course, the same line of reasoning is supposed to apply to color and to other perceptual properties of the desk top. Given the lighting conditions of the room, for

example, it may be that the top looks brown from one angle, grey from another, and black from a third. I used the example of shape rather than color in order to make clear how Berkeley could have used this argument against the Cartesian assertion that shape, in distinction to color, is a primary quality.

Let us assume that the argument is sound as far as the conclusion is concerned that we cannot know the true shape of the desk top. How does it then follow that the top has no shape at all? Obviously it does not. And hence it does not follow that shape must be a sensation in the mind. Nor are there any plausible assumptions which we may add in order to get from our inability to know the shape of the top to the conclusion that it has no shape. At best, therefore, this argument shows that we cannot know the perceptual properties of perceptual objects, but not that they do not have such properties or that such properties exist in minds.

But does it really show that much? I do not think so. I believe that we know the properties of perceptual objects—within the margin of perceptual error, of course—that we know their colors and their shapes. The desk top is rectangular; it is not trapezoidal. And it is, say, brown; it is neither grey nor black. Something must be wrong with the argument. We shall see later on precisely what has gone wrong when we discuss Husserl's theory of aspects. I am afraid that you shall have to wait until then.

### (6) *The attack on substance: Berkeley*

With Descartes, modern philosophy begins. Yet Descartes philosophizes exclusively within the framework of the substance, essence, accident distinction. Shortly after Descartes, an attack on this distinction is launched. I want to impress on you how important this attack is. Descartes, we saw, has one foot in the tradition: he never questions the substance, essence, accident distinction. But he also has one foot in the future: he thinks that minds are independent substances. That there are material substances, and that they have essences and accidental modifications, was an accepted view. But now a fundamental break with this tradition takes place. In the wake of Descartes' philosophy, the very notion of material substance is attacked from two sides. On the one side are the so-called 'British Empiricists' who maintain that substances cannot be known. On the other side are so-called 'Rationalists' who despair of making philosophic sense of the notion of a substance. Both sides propose to supplant the category of substance by that of a bundle of properties. Before we look at this two-pronged criticism, let me try to explain as clearly as possible how the opposing views differ.

According to the traditional view, a view to which Descartes still subscribes, an apple is a material substance which *consists* (in part) of an essence and which *has* certain accidental properties. Among these accidental properties are its color, its taste, its consistency, its smell, etc. We can therefore distinguish between the apple, on the one hand, and its accidental properties, on the other. These two kinds of thing are somehow related to each other. This relation is expressed by the copula 'is' or some form of it. What the relation is, is never adequately explained by the tradition. Nor is this surprising. Relations in general received scant attention. But even though the precise nature of the relation between substance and accident was never fully articulated, it is clear that it is not a whole-part relation, like the relation between substance and essence. A substance in some sense has its accidents but it does not consist of them. A substance is not a whole which has accidents in its parts. Let me impress on you this dogma by repeating: a substance *has* accidents, but does not *consist* of them.

The bundle view, by contrast, holds that an individual thing, the apple of our example, is a bundle of properties, including its accidental properties. The apple is conceived of as a whole of some sort, a whole which consists of all the properties which we ascribe to it. The most fundamental difference between the substance and the bundle view concerns, therefore, the nature of the predication relation.

The bundle view conceives of this relation as a whole-part relation, the substance view does not. ~~think you can see how the bundle view inevitably destroys the distinction between essence and accident.~~ If accidents are just as much part of the individual as its essence is, then they are just as essential to its inner structure as the essence! What we get, therefore, is a view which conceives of an individual thing as a bundle of properties all of which are equally important to the individual. Now, I happen to agree with the bundle view that the distinction between essential and accidental properties cannot be defended. But I also believe, with the substance view, that the relation between an individual and its so-called accidental properties is not a whole-part relation. My view is that none of the properties of an individual, so-called essential or accidental, is a part of the individual. But this is not the place to argue for my position. We shall return to it later in connection with the Platonic distinction between particulars and universals. What we are interested in is the nature of the criticisms which the Empiricists heaped upon the substance view.

Descartes invites their criticism by making a very important albeit mistaken claim for material substances. Material substances, he maintains, can be recognized as the same independently of all their perceptual properties. This is the point of his famous wax example in the Second Meditation. We are invited to consider a fresh piece of wax which has just been taken from a hive. It smells of honey, it is white, has a certain shape and consistency, etc. Now, this piece of wax is held close to a fire: the taste of honey evaporates, the odor vanishes, its color changes from white to black, it changes shape and consistency. We shall assume that all of its original perceptual properties have changed. Do we have the *same* piece of wax after all of these changes have taken place? Descartes says: 'no one denies it, no one judges otherwise.' And then he asks: 'What is it then in this bit of wax that we recognize with so much distinctness? Certainly, it cannot be anything that I observed by means of the senses since everything in the field of taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing is changed, and since the same wax nevertheless remains.' He concludes that the piece of wax 'was neither that sweetness of honey, nor that odor of flowers, nor that whiteness, nor that shape, nor that sound, but only a body which a little while ago appeared to my senses under these forms and which now makes itself felt under others.' And he concludes further that this body is not known by the senses, but by a different faculty of the mind which he calls 'understanding'.

It is certainly true that the piece of wax is not identical with *any one* of its properties. It is not the same as this sweetness of honey or as that odor of flowers. It is also true that the piece of wax is not identical with *either one* of the two bundles of properties, the bundle at the hive and the bundle after it has been held to the fire. For, if it were identical with one of them, it would have to be identical with the other, since we are assuming that it is the same piece of wax. Descartes is right in both regards. But he is wrong when he goes on to conclude that the piece of wax, the substance, is not known by the senses, but by the understanding. He is mistaken when he concludes that there is a special faculty of the mind, different from perception, by means of which we can recognize the same piece of wax directly, independently of all of its properties. We can easily prove that Descartes is mistaken. If there were such a faculty, then we should be able to tell whether or not a piece of wax which is now shown to us is the same as a piece of wax which was shown to us earlier, *even if we have not observed it continuously*. But we are obviously not able to do this. Consider a simpler case. Assume that I show you a white billiard ball and then, a little while later, a white billiard ball again. You will not be able to tell whether the latter is the same as the one which I first showed you. And this proves conclusively that you cannot recognize an individual thing as the same directly and by means of a special mental faculty. Of course, if you can watch the billiard ball which was first shown uninterruptedly until I show you a ball for a second time, then you know whether or not it is the same. What you have observed, by means of the senses, is the spatio-temporal position of the ball.



We conclude from our thought experiment that there is no such faculty as the understanding which allows us to re-identify individual things directly. We can only recognize an individual thing as the same on the basis of its properties, including its spatio-temporal properties. And we know about these properties through perception. An opponent of Cartesian material substances, however, may argue as follows. According to Descartes, a material substance is something which can be recognized directly and independently of all perceptual properties. But we have just seen that individual things cannot be so recognized. It follows, therefore, that individual things cannot be material substances. There simply are no such entities as material substances in the Cartesian sense of the term. Here, then, you have one of the three main arguments against material substances put forth by the Empiricists. It is an argument which Descartes himself invites by his exaggerated claim in behalf of a faculty of understanding.

Another argument is invited by the description which John Locke (1632–1704), one of the British Empiricists who still believes in material substances, gives of such substances. He says:

The idea then we have, to which we give the *general* name substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*; which, according to the import of the word is, in plain English, standing under or upholding. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, xxiii, sec. 2)

Locke here declares that substances are unknowable. Well, if they are unknowable, then we don't know that they exist. And if we do not know that they exist, then we cannot assert that individual things are substances. Why does Locke believe that material substances are unknowable? He does not state his reasons. But we may speculate that he may have had the following argument in mind. A substance, apart and distinguished from all of its properties, cannot be known. It cannot be known because one can know a thing only through its properties. Put differently, in order to know a substance, one must know what properties it has. But the substance, considered by itself, has no properties. Hence, one cannot know it. This argument is obviously unsound. If it were sound, then it would follow that one cannot know anything whatsoever, substances or anything else. For, consider any entity *E*, and distinguish between *E*, on the one hand, and its properties on the other. Now it is impossible to describe *what E is* without mentioning some property or another and, hence, it is impossible to know what *E* is divorced from all of its properties. According to the argument, for example, we could not know elephants because we cannot know what they are; and we cannot know what they are because we do not know what properties they have when considered divorced from all their properties. But, of course, we know what elephants are because we know (some of) their properties. And in the same sense we know what material substances are because we know (some of) their categorial properties. According to Descartes, for example, they are characterized by having extension. Thus while we admit that material substances cannot be known in the sense of known to be the same directly without recourse to their properties, we do not admit that they cannot be known in the sense of known to have such-and-such properties.

There is still another, a third, important sense of knowable which plays a role in the Empiricist attack on material substances. Berkeley claims that material substances are unknowable in that we are never *acquainted* with them. (Note that some languages have different words for knowledge in the sense of knowing something about and knowledge in the sense of acquaintance. In German, one distinguishes between 'wissen' and 'kennen'.) According to Berkeley, we are acquainted with the sensible properties of perceptual objects, but not with their alleged material substances. Witness the following dialogue:

Phil. This point then is agreed between us—that *sensible things are those only which are*

*immediately perceived by sense.* You will further inform me whether we immediately perceive by sight anything besides light and colors and figures; or by hearing, anything but sounds, by the palate, anything besides tastes; by the smell, anything besides odors; or by touch, more than tangible qualities.

Hyl. We do not.

Phil. It seems, therefore, that if you take away all sensible qualities, there remains nothing sensible?

Hyl. I grant it.

Phil. Sensible things therefore are nothing else but so many sensible qualities or combinations of qualities.

Hyl. Nothing else. (*Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965; beginning of the First Dialogue)

Hylas conceded too much when he immediately agrees that we perceive nothing but sensible qualities. This is simply not true. We see, not only colors, shapes, and sizes, but we also see apple mountains, rainbows, and billiard balls. None of these things is a sensible property. What we perceive are individual things and their properties. It looks as if Berkeley means to deny one of the most obvious truisms, namely, that we perceive such individual things as apples.

But note that Philonous claims that sensible things are nothing but combinations (bundles) of qualities. Granted that an apple is not a sensible property—not even a complex property, for what would it be a property of?—could it not be a bundle of such properties? This particular apple, which I shall whimsically call ‘Oscar’, is indeed conceived of by Berkeley as a bundle of sensible qualities: it consists, he maintains, of a certain color, a certain smell, a certain taste, etc. Another apple consists of slightly different sensible properties. For example, its taste may be the same as Oscar’s, but it has a different shape; or its shape may be the same as Oscar’s, but it has a different color and taste; and so on. Thus Berkeley, it may be said, clearly distinguishes between sensory properties, on the one hand, and bundles of such properties, on the other. Oscar, he would admit is not a sensory property, but is a bundle of such properties.

We grant Berkeley his distinction but point out that he has to face the following dilemma. Either Philonous really means it when he claims at the beginning of our quotation that all we can perceive are sensible properties or else he does not. If he does not mean it, if we can perceive things other than sensible qualities, then we shall insist, as we have before, that the things other than properties which we perceive are individual things like the apple, Oscar. Berkeley, in other words, has done nothing to convince us that we cannot be acquainted with material substances. As regards the other horn of the dilemma, if Philonous does mean to say that we cannot perceive anything but sensory properties, then it follows, upon his own view, that we cannot perceive apples, for an apple is not a sensible quality but rather a bundle of such qualities. In this case, it follows not only that we cannot see apples conceived of as material substances, but that we cannot see them even if we conceive of them, like Berkeley, as bundles of properties.

Let me summarize. I distinguished between three different senses in which an individual thing may be said to be known. Contrary to Descartes’ claim, an individual cannot be directly recognized. But we do not have to maintain that it can be so recognized in order to defend the notion of a material substance. It suffices if we hold that such a substance can be known in two ways. It can be known in that we can know things about it; we can know its properties. We can know that a particular body is an elephant; and we can know that all and only bodies are extended. Furthermore, we are also acquainted



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