

## The Basic Reliability of Sense Perception

The third nonnegotiable assumption for apologetics is the basic reliability of sense perception. As we move to this prerequisite for knowledge, we make a transition from the formal realm to the material realm, recognizing that the step is fraught with epistemological peril. We are convinced that an epistemology established upon a naked empiricism is doomed to travel the road to the graveyard of Hume. If the axiom *nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu* is accepted in an absolute sense, skepticism is unavoidable. That is, if all a priori, either of principles or abilities or categories, are excluded, we see no way to progress beyond an inchoate blob of sensations. Not a single datum can be discovered without an a priori making discrimination and individuation possible.

*The Principal Limitation of Empirical Induction.* The principal limitation of empirical induction is widely known—it fails to establish universals. However, a pure empiricism cannot even establish a particular. A blank mind without a priori ideas or abilities must forever remain blank of discriminate perceptions. Without a priori equipment such as Kant's pure intuitions of space and time, or Locke's abilities of combining, relating, and abstracting, or Aristotle's categories, sensa-

tions cannot give rise to perceptions. It is for this reason that post-Humean and post-Kantian empiricists are, for the most part, not pure empiricists but crypto-rationalists. The law of noncontradiction, for example, is not a conclusion drawn from sense perception but a necessary condition for sense perception.

Even if we eschew naked or pure forms of empiricism, we are still left with the question of how we acquire knowledge of the external world. Is it by recollection only, in the Platonic sense? But Plato's highest "proof" of recollection depended upon sense perception for its execution. In the *Meno* dialogue we encounter the discussion between Meno's slave boy and Socrates in which Socrates elicits from the illiterate servant, by the Socratic method, a "recollection" of the Pythagorean theorem. But Socrates does not remain strictly in the realm of abstract mathematics; he resorts to visual aids of lines and squares which are *shown* to the slave boy as Socrates feeds him the leading questions.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps, then, we can leap to the Bible as our source of knowledge of the external world without depending on our senses? But the Bible itself remains inaccessible apart from sense perception. To gain any information from the Bible we must either read it visually, using our eyes, read it in a tactile way, as in Braille, using our fingers, or hear it read to us, using our ears. Without our senses the Bible remains a closed book.

The potential and actual problems attending sense perception such as the limitations of induction, the subject-object problem, and the possibility of Descartes's diabolical great deceiver all cast a shadow on the reliability of our senses. We know that our senses can be deceived and are thus not infallible and that it is possible to have hallucinations and mistake them for reality. Timothy Leary, the high priest of the drug culture of the sixties, defended the experimental use of peyote and L.S.D. at Harvard. When accused of engaging in illicit experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, he argued that L.S.D. was not an hallucinogen but was, in fact, a psychedelic, that is, not a "mind-distorting" but a "mind-expanding" drug. He elicited testimony from artists who claimed augmented ability to perceive color hues and patterns, musicians who discovered new harmonies and tonal structures, and participants in the sexual revolution claimed the ability of orgasmic elbows, all under the influence of L.S.D. Leary was claiming not a distorted view of reality but an intensified and sharper view of reality, a difficult defense to counter.

The comparative weakness of human sensibilities as compared with known sensitivities of other creatures such as the deer's superior olfactory sense (as every deer-hunter is aware of), the turkey's superior optical sense, and the dog's superior auditory sense, all point out the finite limitations of human sense perception. The telescope, microscope, radar, and other devices were built to enhance and improve our sensory powers.

Because our senses are fallible and limited we speak of *basic* or *rudimentary* reliability of sense perception rather than *total*, *perfect*, or *infallible* reliability. Our senses are limited but not impotent; they are problematic, but not useless. But with all these qualifiers, how can we be sure that our senses are even basically reliable and not totally distortive? We cannot. That is why we are left with the common sense necessity of assuming it: The reliability of sense perception must be a working presupposition if knowledge of the external world is to be possible. It is part of the nature or order of knowing simply because it is part of the nature or order of our being as physical, sensory-equipped creatures. Sense perception is a given of our ontological make-up. It can be augmented and enhanced, but it cannot be eliminated. The human body is the person's point of contact with the external world, the bridge from subject to object. We are creatures of sense perception; from this given there is no exit. This realization may be what most heavily contributes to recent renewed interest at the University of Notre Dame and other centers of philosophical inquiry in the Scottish realists like Thomas Reid.

*The Problem of Induction and Certainty.* The chief problem built into induction is the problem of classification into universals. For a universal to be absolutely established inductively requires that a comprehensive and exhaustive sampling be made. The structure of a common syllogism reveals this.

- A. All men are mortal.
- B. Socrates is a man.
- C. Socrates is mortal.

The deductive form of the syllogism is impeccable and the conclusion flows by irresistible logic from the premises. If the premises are true then the conclusion is absolutely certain. But how do we establish the premises? The premises are established inductively, moving from the particular to the universal. Here we encounter a problem which is

not quantitative but qualitative. That is, the barrier to achieving perfect universality of classification is not merely the weakness of our sensory equipment or apparatus but the limits of the *scope* of our investigation, limits that are imposed by space and time. Even if we possessed infallible sensory perception of the particulars, our finite limitations of space and time would create problems for achieving absolute universality via induction. To know with inductive absolute certainty that mortality can be predicated of all men we would have to have a universal sampling of all men. We may have astronomical incidences of the particular mortality of individual men giving us, in Humean categories, an astronomical probability quotient of universal mortality, but it falls short of absolute inductive certainty of universal mortality. Absolute inductive certainty would require the observation of the mortality of each and every human being, including those billions who are presently alive.

Assuming the basic reliability of sense perception will not solve the inductive problem in premise A. Premise B has similar difficulties. "Socrates is a man" predicates the relationship of an individual to a class, a particular to a universal. The manness of Socrates suffers from the inductive problems of Premise A. But even if we grant that there is a universal category of man we still have to identify Socrates as a member of the class. Socrates may appear to be a man but actually be a bionic replica or an hallucination of the perceiver. Our assumption of basic reliability will solve this problem of quality, but the problem of universal quantification remains.

What the assumption of basic reliability of sense perception does achieve is knowledge of the particular, without which not even relative inductive certainty of universals is possible. Without knowledge of the particular, induction cannot begin and even Hume's probability quotients crumble into ashes. There cannot be two incidences of a given phenomenon without there first being one (the particular is at least logically prior if not temporally prior to the universal).

It is because of this inherent problem of the relationship between induction and certainty that many Christian apologists have sought to avoid any dependence on empirical data for building a case for the existence of God, retreating either to fideism or sheer ontologism for their approach. To venture into the empirical realm of sense perception is assumed to necessitate a foray into the hopeless land of probability and its attending levels of uncertainty. This is why thinkers such as Descartes sought to establish the existence of God prior to facing

the complexities of sense perception. (Descartes's God functioned as a safeguard against the devious ploys of the diabolical great deceiver.) This is what motivates the presuppositional apologists to begin their apologetics with the assumption of the existence of God, a move which Section 3 of this volume will endeavor to show raises more problems than it solves.

That God is ontologically prior to all human knowledge is not disputed by any theist. The problem arises, as we shall see later, when we make God a question-begging first principle of epistemology. We are seeking here not to separate ontology and epistemology but to distinguish them. Since we are concerned here with epistemology, we are restricting ourselves to matters of knowing rather than matters of being.

We dispute the skeptical notion that all matters of empiricism destroy certainty. We do not need to have universal knowledge to have certain knowledge. One empirical datum is all that is required to gain certain knowledge of God, as we shall endeavor to show in Section 2. Because induction does not yield the absolute *universal* does not mean that it cannot yield absolute *truth*. We will endeavor to show that the contingent truths of history do in fact yield eternal truth, Lessing notwithstanding. We will endeavor to show that we can move from the phenomenal to the noumenal by the application of the law of noncontradiction, the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception. Like assumptions one and two, the assumption of the basic reliability of sense perception is neither arbitrary nor subjectivistic. It is an assumption all people make and all *must* make to live, the denial of which is forced and temporary, as are the denials of logic and causality.

That all must assume the basic reliability of sense perception may be illustrated by yet another visit to John Cage's mushroom patch. When he concludes that a chance approach to mushroom consumption will bring about his death, he assumes that he can at least distinguish a mushroom from a cactus with his lips if not with his eyes. Our driver at the intersection likewise trusts his senses when he applies his brakes to avoid the oncoming truck.

That Scripture likewise assumes the basic reliability of sense perception is seen in a multitude of ways. To be sure, Scripture speaks of realities which are not normally perceived, like the angels surrounding Elisha at Dothan and the invisible presence of the Holy Spirit. Yet God leads Israel through the wilderness by a visible pillar of fire and pillar

of cloud. The testimony of the apostles to the person and work of Jesus is not based on mystical intuitions or upon theories or recollection. It was Philip who declared to Nathanael, "Come and see" (John 1:46). It was the apostle John who asserted:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. (1 John 1:1 RSV)

The triad of the law of noncontradiction, the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception is integral to all knowledge. Their forced and temporary denials take place in the courts of subjectivism. In instance after instance where natural theology in general and the theistic proofs in particular have been attacked, one or more of these three building blocks of knowledge has been negotiated.