

Topic Number: 4

“Student: And thereby, what becomes the purpose of objects, if they are in themselves nothing as they seem to be...

Master: O, son, you have but much to accept; learn to doubt for accepting, do not doubt without purpose, for the mind of the skeptic is one involved in many aspects of doubt...”

I would like to discuss in this essay the notions of appearance, and how an object's appearance may or may not relate to the original object and how this helps us to build doubt as a key component of advancing philosophical questions. More specifically I want to evaluate the following quote by Sextus Empiricus and use it as a base for bringing up some traditional problems in philosophy:

“And when we questions whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant the fact that it appears and our doubt does not concern the appearance itself but the account given of that appearance –and that is a different thing from questioning the appearance itself. For example, honey appears to use to be sweet (and this we grant for we perceive sweetness through the senses), but whether it is also sweet in it essence is for us a matter of doubt, since this is not an appearance but a judgment about the appearance¹.”

Before we elaborate on the nature of objects, and the implications of Sextus Empiricus' quote, we need to take into account what is his argument in the first place and to review the assumptions behind his argument. In the path of doubting nature, Empiricus firstly seems to accept that things do appear. Thus he overrides the first question of doubt, which is whether the appearance is real, in the first place. Before we build any metaphysics, the question of whether my appearance is real needs to be answered.

Let us consider why the first premise² of Empiricus is assumed (in his quote) to not be of importance (or taken as an accepted fact). A skeptic may argue that an object he sees before himself is not real (Sk1). Thus the pot of honey (in the quote above) is in-itself not real. This is “questioning the appearance itself.” Why does this question become irrelevant (also how so)? If we accept that in all our experience what we perceive is merely within our mind, and that nothing outside of the mind is real, then we are lead to an in-coherent system which restricts our ability to progress in the building of the metaphysics. For in such a system the sense data³ is only dependent on the mind and the object being perceived is a creation of the mind. Let us take an example which can show us how this becomes in-coherent. Say I am perceiving a goldfish swimming in a bowl. If I doubt the appearance itself, then I doubt the goldfish exists independently of my mind or my perception. Thus if I stop thinking (considering that anything which is “in” the

¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.10 (2nd Century AD)

² The premise in his quote is “we grant the fact that is appears...”

³ Sense data is the data from an object we perceive that allows us to perceive it. For example my perception of a pencil is based on the sense data such as the light reflecting off of it, or the sensation of touch I get when I touch the pencil and so on...

mind is being thought about by that mind) about the Goldfish it will stop swimming in the bowl. Further, imagine if I stop perceiving the Goldfish, (through the sense data of light which allows me to "see" the goldfish swimming) for a period of time and continue to perceive it after sometime. If the goldfish I perceive has a different behavior, say it swims faster now, then according to the skeptic asking a question such as Sk 1, then the new behavior is merely my mind's creation. However the entire metaphysical system being built becomes much more coherent if we say that the Goldfish swam faster because it is hungry. If we accept the fish is hungry, then we accept that the existence of the Goldfish is independent of my mind or my ability to perceive the Goldfish. Thus we do not need to question the appearance itself and we may grant the fact that it appears.

Since we have explained a smaller premise in his quote, we can now look into the other, more relevant aspects of his quote which is primarily the difference he draws between the "nature of the object in an account given" and the "nature of the object in its essence."

Sextus' idea that the account of an appearance is different to the appearance in itself stems from the idea of what he defines as an "account." When we say that an account of something is given then it necessarily implies someone giving the account. Any account of an appearance, by a being, requires a certain judgment by the being. A judgment may be a statement about the nature of the experience of the appearance. This experience is simply the process of perceiving the sensory data that emanates from the object. The judgment made about the object will be a simple statement such as "X is sweet." The judgment means that there is a certain belief, the being has about the nature of the appearance.

The judgment is made on the basis that the being recognizes some previous concept (such as sweetness) which he may have been experienced before. Regardless of previous experience of the concepts, the key idea is that it is upon the basis of experience that the being tends to make the judgment about the object. However, the key question that Empiricus wants us to consider is whether this judgment is necessarily right. There is a key point that we need to recognize here. The judgment has a truth value, which describes the nature of the object in fact. The question then becomes what makes the judgment true? Can we say that if the honey is sweet in its essence, then the judgment is true or if several people perceive the honey to be sweet then can we say the judgment is true regardless of the true nature of the honey? The true nature of the honey or the honey's sweetness in essence becomes the best possible manner to validate a truth value for the judgment since it will provide a common fact from which we can evaluate each judgment. However the key problem is doing so becomes whether a judgment is only within the mind.

In process of perceiving the honey there are some properties intrinsic to the honey which allows us to perceive it in that manner. (Note this does not mean that the honey is intrinsically sweet all - we are saying is there is something about the honey that makes

us perceive it in the way we do.) When we make the judgment, it is our mind that categorizes the sensory data into certain categories. Thus the nature of the mind, or the state of the mind has an important implication in the nature of the judgment.

Take the example of Othello's⁴ judgment that his wife is unfaithful. His judgment is completely on the basis of a certain state of mind he is brought into before making the judgment. Further his judgment is a belief about the relationship between him and his wife. However in reality this is not the case, which makes both his belief and judgment wrong. The judgment, which is based on certain facts, becomes false when either the facts⁵ themselves are wrong or a certain state of mind causes an individual to mis-read the facts. In a larger sense, we have to accept that our judgment about an appearance maybe false, due to our inability to know all possible facts or a mind which happens to distort the original facts. The former which is to know all possible facts relevant to make a correct judgment is impossible in the case of humans as our perception is not descriptive about the complete essence of an object. This is an important idea which we must elaborate more on.

In a perception, we only use the sense data available to us. However in any case it maybe so that there is more data that we cannot perceive. It is never possible for us to have knowledge about the entire data there is to perceive. This is analogous to a color blind dog which cannot see the color red. A color blind dog may not see the red, however because of a human's higher ability to perceive, we can see a certain color red. Similarly it may be very well true that humans may be ignorant of certain sensory data which we cannot perceive and thereby limits the nature of our perception. Further a mind may also add certain features which distort a perception. This becomes a subjective connotation the being that is experiencing the object may have to the object, due to a state of mind or previous experiences. For example a person who has had something sweeter than honey, will feel honey bitter when he consumes the honey⁶. The sweetness therefore varies according to the previous thing the person has tasted (or perceived). Thus we can make two primary conclusions:

Our ability to know about the sweetness of the honey in its essence is distorted by

- a. Our possible inability to completely perceive an object and therefore the possibility that our perception is different in some sense to the actual object (and its true essence)
- b. The possibility that our judgment is influenced by some part of the mind which is categorizing previous experiences and may have a different state of mind

⁴ Othello takes his wife to cheat on him, because his ensign feeds lies into his mind and he mistakes certain facts as proof of his wife's adultery. However his judgment or belief about his wife is wrong because in the end the reader is aware of his wife's innocence.

⁵ Facts can be considered the data for making a judgment

⁶ This is similar to the experience of drinking sweet tea, after eating a bar of chocolate. The sweet tea may feel bitter.

Therefore in its true essence the honey may not be sweet. However this does not lead us to a very far conclusion. We are still remaining with a few problems. If the honey is not “in its essence” sweet then how can we perceive it as sweet? Does the honey in its true essence have a property called sweetness or is it a concept that human experience characterizes and nothing in its true essence is what our perception of it appears to be.

Such questions we are lead to, raise metaphysical systems which different philosophers have professed. Take the Kantian metaphysics⁷ which proposes that objects in their true nature only exist in the intelligible world, which we human beings can have no knowledge of. In Kant`s metaphysics (and others similar systems which advocate such ideas – see footnote 6) every account of appearance is given by the forms (such as Space and Time) and concepts (fundamental laws by which our mind characterizes experience) which our mind uses to characterize its experience in the sensible world. However the only account we can give or judgment we can make about the honey becomes reducible to the sensible world, which according to Kant is the world we can perceive with our mind. By relegating the true essence of any object to the intelligible world we can have no experience of, Kant solves the problem of doubting the true nature of the things we perceive (appearances).

In such a metaphysical system, sweetness becomes simply a property or concept of our mind and bears no relationship to the true essence of the object, which we can never know of. However is this philosophical escapism, on the part of such metaphysical theories to answer the question by differing true nature of objects from what we perceive.

However we are still confounded by the problem of which property of an object is it that then causes its true nature? If everything we perceive is within our mind`s apriori structures to make judgments about the sensible world, then we completely reject the idea that something that is the true nature of the object has caused the property we experience.

Within the metaphysics of Kant, there arises the problem whether the object (honey) in the intelligible world is the same as the object in the sensible world. It could be the case that what we experience in the sensible world is simply a small set of sensory data of the same object in the intelligible world. Otherwise we can also say that there are two different worlds, however there is the problem of how the true nature of something can in any possible sense be experienced in the sensible world, as nothing of the true world is perceivable in our world⁸. Thus we can say that in part Kant solves Empiricus` question of doubt however his metaphysics may not be very coherent either as questions of links between objects in both worlds raise further questions.

⁷ Although I am only considering Kantian ethics, there are a wider set of metaphysical theories which create two worlds or two different forms, whereby in only one world lies the true nature of objects. Another example would be Plato`s theory of forms.

⁸ The issue highlighted here raises two interpretations of Kant`s metaphysics which is the two objects or two aspects interpretation.

We can now designate a certain nature to the problem raised by Empiricus, the problem of what to doubt. The judgment or the given account of an experience can be differentiated from the true sense (or essence of the object) if we consider the “real object” as different from what we perceive however we still consider them a part of the larger singular world. In such a system we could say that the honey in-itself is different from the honey we perceive and the concepts (such as sweetness) which we use to describe what we perceive, but that some property of the true nature of honey leads us to perceive these concepts. However we can distinguish the true nature of honey from what we perceive in the sense that we can never know completely of the true nature of honey in the same way as that which we perceive. We can know however that there is something in the true essence of the object that is the cause of all the concepts we judge, however different and in whatever manner we judge these perceptions. We can say this since different human beings (although in different senses) may perceive the sweetness differently, however the fact that there is something being perceived implies a cause which can only be evident in the true essence of the object.

Therefore we have discussed the problem as posed by Empiricus and seen the nature in which his question (which is evident of high skepticism) helps us build a metaphysical system which helps us answer the rather epistemic questions he poses. It can be said that no metaphysical system is perfect in that we can ever truly know the essence of an object. An essence may be characterized as the original purpose of an object or and thus its true essence as the true purpose of the object. However a lot of our knowledge is simply restricted by the limitations of our perceptions, and our ability to express these perceptions with language. Thus the essence of objects simply becomes too complex for us to judge.

“Master: For we have now seen that many a men may ask skeptical questions but it is he who can answer the skeptic succeeds.”