

## TOPIC NUMBER: 4

AND WHEN WE QUESTION 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 US TO BE SWEET (AND THIS WE GRANT, FOR WE PERCEIVE SWEETNESS THROUGH THE SENSES), BUT WHETHER IT IS ALSO SWEET IN ITS ESSENCE IS FOR US A MATTER OF DOUBT, SINCE THIS IS NOT AN APPEARANCE BUT A JUDGEMENT ABOUT THE APPEARANCE. – SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, OUTLINES OF PYRRHONISM I.10 (2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY AD)

### APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY

#### PART – I

Do we in our daily lives, doubt whether the object, you perceive, actually exists? Do we doubt whether, if the object actually exists, appears as we perceive it? Do we doubt the account of the appearance of the object, as perceived by somebody else? If yes/no, why do we do so? Also, is doubting the appearance of something different from doubting the account of appearance by someone else? If yes, how? I shall try to answer these questions in my essay.

In order to understand the quote better, it is recommended that, we first, interpret some of the terms present in the quote. What do we mean by appearance? According to me, the appearance of an object is our perception of the object *viz.* our senses such as the sense of vision, the sense of touch, the sense of taste, the sense of hearing, the sense of smell. For example, consider the substance vinegar. When this substance is brought near us, we perceive its characteristic smell. Hence, its appearance is our perception of its characteristic smell. But, this leads to another question, although irrelevant to the theme of the quote (but helps us understand the term ‘appearance’ better) – can one *type* of appearance (as in either taste or smell or touch etcetera) lead to another type of appearance, *probably*? Consider the same example once again. By the smell of vinegar, am I able to *guess* the taste of vinegar? For this particular example, yes. I can make out that the vinegar will be sour as far as taste is concerned. This guess may or may not be correct, of course. But, can I *guess* the color of the vinegar, considering I have not seen vinegar before? Probably not.

Now that I have interpreted the term ‘appearance’, let us not focus our concentration on the term ‘essence’. Essence, according to me, is the primary element of a substance. It may be the thing’s nature. It is something which makes the thing what it is. A substance or an object cannot lose its essence unless it ceases to exist.

After explaining some of the terms in this quote, I shall now provide you with an example to interpret the quote. Consider four men, Bob (a realist<sup>1</sup>), Harry (also a realist), Alex (a dualist<sup>2</sup>) and James (a rationalist<sup>3</sup>) sitting on the dining table, trying to interpret the color of the table. According to Bob, the table appears to be of some shade of the color brown (Let us call this shade X). To Harry, who is also a realist, the table appears to be some other shade of the color brown. (Let us call this shade Y) (In this case, the difference in the perception of the table is due to the properties of reflection of light and the position of the person in the room). On the other hand, James, who is a rationalist, thinks that the color of the table cannot be found

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<sup>1</sup> A realist is a person who believes that what he perceives actually exists or is the way the object actually appears.

<sup>2</sup> A dualist is a person who believes that what we perceive is a copy/impression/reflection of the actual object. For example, the ‘real’ object exists in a different world (different from ours) and cannot be understood or perceived by us as in the case of Kant’s idea of *noumena*.

<sup>3</sup> A rationalist is a person whose understanding of something is backed by reason and logic.

fundamentally. This, he reasons, because, a person perceives an object to be of some color only due to the fact that light reflects from it in a way different from that from an object of different color. But, Alex would doubt whether the table, they see, is in actual the real table itself. He would say that it could be that the table they perceive is just a reflection of the real table in the actual world, which cannot be perceived. Hence, he would think that the question of the color of the table is itself invalid. What do we see from this example? We see the following:

- There might be instances when a person doubts the existence of something itself. Similarly, there could be instances when a person doubts whether the object we perceive is the actual object itself.
- There might be instances when the appearance of an object, as perceived by Person 1, is different from that perceived by Person 2.

Let us now see what we can interpret according to Sextus Empiricus:

1. We do not doubt that we have perceived the object to have some color i.e. it is not to say that the actual color of the table is what we perceive it to have. Rather, we say that we cannot doubt the appearance of the table, as perceived, by a person under specified situations. We can safely say that any person, if not color blind, will perceive the table to have the same color if placed at the same position under the same conditions.
2. However, we do doubt whether the color we have perceived is the true or the actual color of the table itself, as the rationalist had done.
3. It could also be the case where Sextus Empiricus doubts or tries to find out the true color of the table and remove the element of subjectivity in the perceptions of appearance of the table.
4. This implies that Sextus Empiricus considers the table to be existent and hence, does not doubt the existence of table.

Let us, now, consider the example given by Sextus Empiricus itself, and see if the implications drawn from it are consistent with the implications drawn above. Sextus Empiricus gives us the example of honey.

1. He does not doubt that we perceive the honey to be sweet.  
⇒ Hence, the implication 1 above in the previous example is consistent with this implication.
2. He doubts whether the object is intrinsically sweet.  
⇒ This implication is consistent with implication number 2 in the previous example.

To complete the part I of my essay, let me summarize the factors that Sextus Empiricus doubts.

1. Sextus Empiricus doubts whether our perception actually represents the object.
2. He does not doubt that we perceive the object to have some property.<sup>4</sup>
3. But, he asks the question – is the object actually the way it appears to be? The fundamental question he asks is whether the appearance or perception corresponds to the reality.
4. Hence, he doubts the accounts of appearance given by different people, probably at different instances, in different situations. He looks for or searches for correspondence of our perception of the appearance of a substance with the reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Note, this is not in contradiction with point number 1 in the summary. As in the example of the table, the rationalist does not doubt that Bob and Harry perceive the table to have some color. He, too, perceives the table to have some color. However, he knows that this appearance of the table is due to the properties of light and that the table does not have an intrinsic color of its own. Hence, he says that the appearance does not correspond to the reality.

CONCLUSION OF PART – I: When we question whether our perception of the appearance of the table corresponds with the reality, we keep in mind that we do perceive the object to have some appearance and take that for granted, but we check whether this perception of the appearance of the object actually corresponds with the reality.

## **PART – II**

So, does our perception of the appearance of an object correspond with the reality? We already are aware of our perception of the appearance of the object. So, if we know the object in actual, our job is done – we can, then, easily say whether our perception of the appearance of the object corresponds with the reality or not. In order to do that, we need to know what the object is like in reality. But, can we know that?

According to Kant, the objects that we see around us are just reflections of the real objects. The world where we can perceive is known as the phenomena and the ‘real’ world is called the noumena. According to him, it is impossible to know or perceive or understand the noumena. So, it is impossible for us, according to him, to know whether the table had the brown color or any color at all. It is impossible for us to know whether the honey, in its true sense, tastes sweet or not. Descartes has a similar argument, but he does not believe in a different ‘real’ world. He leaves the possibility of an evil genius to deceive us into believing that what we perceive is the truth. He says that it could be otherwise. Here, we have considered the points of view of dualists<sup>5</sup> who believe that it is impossible for us to know the reality. In this case, it is a matter of doubt whether the perceptions of the appearance of an object actually correspond with the reality.

Let us now consider the points of view of relativists. Consider the example of honey once again. But, imagine that the person in question has already consumed a very sweet substance compared to honey, prior to the consumption of honey. For this person, the honey may not appear to be sweet. However, for a person who has consumed some spicy substance prior to the consumption of honey, he will be under the notion that honey is a very sweet substance. Hence, according to relativists, it is impossible to know the true taste of honey since the taste of a substance is always relative and dependent on the circumstances under which the object is perceived (in this case, consumed).

These two schools of thought show us that whether our perception corresponds with the reality is a matter of doubt and hence, (as in the quote), whether honey is also sweet in its essence is a matter of doubt.

## **PART – III**

Is it that, it is impossible to determine to the actual nature of a substance? Is it not possible that all people may agree upon the nature of a substance? Well, an objectivist would say yes. It is possible to leave the doubt whether our perceptions correspond to reality. This was illustrated in the example of color of the table by a rationalist. While there was a person who thought that it was impossible to determine the color of the table since the ‘real’ table cannot be perceived as in the case of dualism and two people who had different perceptions of the appearance of the table, rationalists or rather objectivists, here, used physics – the reflection of light and dispersion of white light into seven colors – to show that the table, did not, in essence or intrinsically, possess any color. The objectivists, here, have shown the true nature of the table. If one still doubts whether the argument put forward from extending Descartes’s argument (that an evil

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<sup>5</sup> I am not considering only Descartes and Kant as dualists here. So, the conclusions from this paragraph apply to all dualists in general, but not necessarily to the details of Descartes’ and Kant’s dualistic theory. For example, I do not think Descartes believed that we could not perceive the reality.

genius has deceived us into believing that the table does not have an intrinsic color of its own), we could use Ockham's Razor to say that the theory proposed by the objectivists is more likely to be true due to its simplicity when compared to the theory extended from Descartes's argument. If one still supports Descartes, he will have to build upon the only statement concerned certain by Descartes i.e. I exist. However, in the process of doing so, one would have to use reason and hence, rationality, as suggested by Descartes (since perception can be falsified by the Evil Genius argument) and would, therefore, arrive at the same solution as the objectivists or the rationalists.

But, what about the taste of honey? Can the taste of honey also be objectified and hence, not relative or impossible to know due to the school of thought proposed by dualism? The taste of a substance is determined by the amount of chemical substances such as sucrose (form of sugar). For the time being, there is no 'scale' of sweetness, but, as I said, it can be quantified. Let us consider one more example from the relativistic point of view to argue against them. Consider the 'hotness' of water. How do we know how hot the water is? The simplistic way would be to touch the water and determine how 'hot' the water is. But, what if the person had immersed his hand in ice prior to his touching of water? In that situation, the water would appear to be very hot compared to a situation when a person has touched water after being in contact with something warm. So, how would the objectivists argue against this? It is the property of substances to expand when heated. Now-a-days, thermometers (which contain mercury – mercury also expands when brought in contact with heat) are used to measure the 'hotness' of water. If the water in situation X is hotter than the water in situation Y, the mercury will expand more in situation X and hence, show more reading. This, objectively, determines the hotness or rather the temperature of the water sample.

#### **PART – IV**

The problem, according to Sextus Empiricus was that it was a matter of doubt whether the appearance of an object is in correspondence with the reality. The situation of doubt is a condition of suspension of judgment or inability to take sides at that particular instant. Hence, Sextus Empiricus considered the situation of perception being in correspondence to unverifiable or doubtful at that instant. The argument that I have presented in Part II and part IV do not conclude whether our perception is always in correspondence (since only some examples were taken into account – let me give an example of a situation where the appearance is in correspondence with the reality – we perceive rain drops to be falling on us when we are out in the open. We look above and see no other way of rain drops falling except from clouds – hence, our perception or appearance may be in correspondence with the reality.) with the reality or not in general. It does not make conclusions upon this issue. However, the argument presented has removed the doubtability in the following situation:

- ⇒ It is possible, using the ideas of an objectivist and rationalist, to determine whether our perception is in correspondence with the reality. It may be that they are in correspondence or not. The theory proposed by the objectivists and the rationalists provide a way to determine this.

Let me summarize this for the reader. Sextus Empiricus doubted whether our perception was consistent with the reality. He thought that it was a matter of doubt (to which a conclusion cannot be easily known or known at that point of time). However, I presented view points that said that it was not possible to compare our perceptions of the appearance of an object with the reality – dualist and relativists. Then, I argued against dualism and relativism to show that it can objectively known whether the perceptions are in consistency with the reality (Note that we have only considered appearances and perceptions and not situations in ethics where objectivists can be argued upon).