IS A SENSE-DATUM LANGUAGE NECESSARY?*

WILLIAM P. ALSTON

University of Michigan

The sense-datum theory of perception has been under heavy attack in the last two decades. Recently, by way of counterattack, some of its defenders have accused what they take to be its chief rival, the "theory of appearing", of various deficiencies.[1] In particular, they have claimed that there are some perceptual, or pseudo-perceptual, situations,[2] such as hallucinations and dreams, of which the theory of appearing can give no adequate account. For in these cases, they argue, the question, "What is it that is appearing?", can be given no satisfactory answer. The conclusion is then drawn that only a language containing sense-datum terms is generally adequate to our perceptual experience. Moreover this line of argument has been taken seriously by at least one partisan of the theory of appearing, Professor Virgil C. Aldrich, who has been driven to the expedient of suggesting that in these cases it is an image which appears.[3]

Now I have no wish to defend the "theory of appearing", especially when put in such pompous terms as: "'Appearing' is the name of a unique and unanalysable *three-term relation* between a part of an object's surface, a characteristic or set of characteristics, and a certain mind."[4] But I do wish to take exception to the claim that there are certain perceptual situations which can be described only in terms of sense-data. This claim is initially very dubious in the light of the following considerations. The sense-datum lingo is a special one, introduced for certain philosophic purposes; it is not part of our ordinary way of talking about perceptual situations. Moreover I suppose it would now be generally admitted, especially after Bouwsma's famous failure to follow Moore's directions for picking out a sense-datum, that we cannot give meaning to the crucial sense-datum terms by an sort of ostension. Nor could it be claimed, I believe, that they acquire meaning through their function in some explanatory theory, for no such theory exists. Hence it would seem that they can only be introduced by designating sentences in which they occur as equivalent to certain sentences in ordinary discourse. But if so, then no situation could be described by sense-datum language which could not also be otherwise described. However this argument

* Received July, 1956

[1] Roderick Firth, "Phenomenalism", in *Science, Language, and Human Rights*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952. Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Theory of Appearing", *Philosophical Analysis*, (ed. Max Black), Ithaca, N. Y., Cornell University Press, 1950.

[2] I shall use the phrase 'perceptual situation' to refer to any situation in which someone is perceiving something, or in which something is happening which does, or might, lead someone to erroneously suppose that he is perceiving something. Where I want to distinguish between these two sub-classes, I shall speak of 'genuine perceptual' and 'pseudo-perceptual' situations.

[3] "What Appears", *Philosophical Review*, LXIII; 2, April, 1954, esp. 238–240.

[4] H. H. Price, *Perception*, London, Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1932, p. 62.

rests on assumptions—semantic and otherwise—which may not be generally admitted. And in any event it would have to be supplemented by a consideration of the specific sorts of facts which, it is claimed, can be adequately described only in a sense-datum language. Let us turn to a scrutiny of this claim.

It should be noted first that in these discussions the "language of appearing" (i.e., the language in which the "theory of appearing" describes perceptual situations) is construed as consisting exclusively of sentences of the form "O is sensibly stimulated by M which appears in such and such a way to O," where "M" refers to some physical object, and "O" is the designation of a sentient being.[5] Obviously we can only use this statement-form where we are in a position to specify a physical object which appears so-and-so to the observer. And, equally obviously, we are in no such position in cases of complete hallucination, where there is no physical object such as the observer takes himself to be perceiving, or in dreams, where that which is dreamed about is (usually) not sensibly stimulating him in any way.

But this argument would prove the necessity of a sense-datum language, only if expressions of the form "M appears to O" provided its only alternative for the description of perceptual situations, and such is not the case. We possess a wealth of other locutions for doing these jobs. If, e.g., I wished to describe, or report, a drunken hallucination, I could say any of the following:

1. I seemed to be seeing a pink rat in that corner.
2. There seemed to be a pink rat in that corner.
3. It seemed that there was a pink rat in that corner.
4. It was as if I were seeing a pink rat in that corner.
5. I had the sort of experience that one has when one is seeing a pink rat.
6. There appeared to be a pink rat in that corner.
7. It appeared that there was a pink rat in that corner.

Any of these sentences could be used, in a non-philosophical context, to successfully communicate both the fact and the nature of the hallucination. And although none of them would fall within what Chisholm and Firth call the "language of appearing", I do not suppose that anyone would consider them to belong to a sense-datum language.[6]

With respect to other pseudo-perceptual situations the same point holds. Contrary to Chisholm's assertion that "all of us tend to describe" dreams "in the manner of the sense-datum language",[7] our normal locution for reporting dreams is "I dreamed that . . ." or "I dreamed about . . .". If I were to say, outside a philosophy classroom, "I had a (dream) bull-fightish datum last night", instead of "I dreamed last night that I was in a bull fight", or "I dreamed last night

[5] Firth, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[6] If the term "sense-datum language" were stretched to include expressions like these, in addition to expressions of the form, "This datum is pink-ratish", "I am immediately aware of something which is pink-ratish", "The corner of the room presents me with a pink-ratish sense datum", etc., then one would have ground for suspecting that it is simply being used as synonymous with "language adequate for describing perceptual experiences". In which case the question of its necessity for this purpose would lose its interest.

[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

about a bull fight", you would probably be puzzled at first; perhaps you would take me to be reporting a waking image which had a dream-like quality, or a picture which passed before my mind when only half asleep. To render my assertion unambiguous I would probably have to either say "No, I mean a real (sic) dream", or else restate the point in the more usual manner.

The cases of imagination, after-images, etc., do not seem to me to fall within the area we are considering (pseudo-perceptual situations), although philosophers often treat them as raising the same problems. (In fact Chisholm's version of the crushing question is, "What is it that appears when I imagine a unicorn?".)[8] But nothing which we would identify as a case of imagination involves a supposition by the subject that he is perceiving something. Any "image" which would fool us in this way would be classed as an hallucination, and so would be covered by the above treatment. It is, however, of interest to note that we have a number of ways of talking about imagination without using locutions which seem to imply that there are sense-datum like entities called images, after-images, etc. We can say things like "She appeared to me in imagination.", "I vividly imagined her before me.", or "It was as if I were still seeing the light after I shut my eyes."

Firth does consider some locutions of the sort which I am suggesting as alternatives to a sense-datum description of hallucinations. But he objects:

> Unfortunately, however, the word "appears", as it occurs in the sentences "There appears to me to be a pink rat here" and "It appears to me that there is a pink rat here", is most naturally interpreted in what Chisholm calls the "epistemic" as contrasted with the "phenomenological" sense. That is to say, these sentences would ordinarily be taken to mean "*I am inclined to believe that* there is a pink rat here", or "On the basis of the available evidence, *it is probable that* there is a pink rat here". They do not seem to be phenomenological statements about sensory experience, for if we combine them with the sense-datum language, it does not seem self-contradictory to assert "I have a pink-rat sense datum, but it appears to me that there is (there seems to me to be) *no* pink rat here."[9]

Let us note that Firth is here considering only 6 and 7 of our list explicitly (and 2 and 3 by implication), the ones most favorable for his case. With respect to 1, 4, and 5, it seems clear that they not only can be used in what Firth calls the phenomenological sense, but that they can only be used in this way. But with respect to 6 and 7 (and the same would hold for their cognates, 2 and 3), Firth has shown that they are used epistemically in the context he specifies, and hence that they are capable of that use. But this is not sufficient to show that they have no other use in any contexts. Strawson's distinction between an expression and a use of an expression is relevant here. It would be fallacious to suppose that, because a phrase has a certain use in a given context, this use is intrinsic to the expression, in the sense that it always has that use and is capable of no other. In this case the expressions in question certainly do have the other use. This can be shown by using Firth's technique. One might say without self-

[8] *Op. cit.*, 117.
[9] *Op. cit.*, 17–18.

contradiction, and with perfect propriety, "There appears (seems) to me to be [it appears (seems) to me that there is] a pink rat over there, but I am not fooled (I don't believe there really is)." Here, obviously, "appears" ("seems") has its phenomenological use. In fact, this "but" clause might very well be added if I wanted to guard against your misinterpreting the "seems" (or "appears") as epistemic.

To go into detail for a moment, we have four locutions, each of which can successfully be used in both the epistemic and phenomenological senses:

1. It seems (to me) that
2. It appears (to me) that
3. There seems (to me) to be
4. There appears (to me) to be

There are subtle shades of difference here. It seems that, in the absence of sufficient contextual indications, 1 and 2 are more readily interpreted epistemically, 3 and 4 phenomenologically. "It appeared to me that there was a pink rat, but I didn't believe it." sounds a trifle paradoxical, as does "There didn't seem to be a pink rat there, but it was as if I were seeing a pink rat.". It is interesting, in this connection, to note that Firth in his discussion gradually shifts the emphasis from the sentence quoted from Ayer, "There appears to me to be a pink rat here" to "It appears to me that there is a pink rat here".[10] I would also judge that "seems" is a shade more phenomenological in these locutions than is "appears". And it seems that the addition of "to me" tips the balance toward the epistemic interpretation; it seems to carry a suggestion (though not an assertion) of private judgment or opinion.

But subtleties aside, the main point is that our language provides us with many ways of intelligibly describing pseudo-perceptual situations like hallucinations and dreams without making use of sense-data terms. Hence Firth's conclusion that "For all these purposes we must use the sense-datum language."[11] is unjustified.

Firth has another argument for this conclusion; and although in his statement it depends on the point we have already rejected, it will be worth our while to examine it; for it might conceivably be restated so as to make no use of that assumption. Assuming that we must describe hallucinations in terms of sense-data, one might still propose to describe genuine perceptions in the "language of appearing". Firth then has two embarrassing questions for one who would make such a proposal.

> 1. ". . . how can we refer to the most obvious respect in which an hallucination is similar to a genuine perception if we are not permitted to say that they include similar images or sense-data?"[11]
>
> 2. How can we describe the evidence which supports the disjunction: "I am really perceiving a book or else I am having a book hallucination" more strongly than it supports either of the two disjuncts separately.[12]

---

[10] *Op. cit.*, 17–18.

[11] *Op. cit.*, 14.

[12] *Op. cit.*, 15.

These are of course essentially the same problem, and they do constitute a serious difficulty for one who would attempt to use two radically different languages for the descriptions of these two sorts of facts.

Since we have already rejected the claim that hallucinations must be described in sense-datum language, we are not faced with the problem in just this form. But it might still be claimed that the sense-datum terminology provides us with a better way of making explicit the phenomenological similarity of hallucinations and perceptions than the ragtail assortment of expressions listed above. Such a claim would, however, be unjustified. Our ordinary ways of talking about hallucinations provide us with ample means for emphasizing the perception-like character of hallucinations. This feature is brought out most clearly by expressions like "It was as if I were seeing a pink rat", or "I seemed to be seeing a pink rat". The similarity in question is brought out by these locutions at least as clearly as by locutions like "I apprehended a pink-ratish sense datum."

I suspect that one source of the attractiveness of the sense-datum language for many philosophers lies in their feeling that we should use a single statement-form, or a single (small) set of terms, to describe all perceptual situations. Since any other candidate, such as the "language of appearing" turns out to be insufficiently flexible, it is concluded that we must use the sense-datum language. But this demand for uniformity is a questionable one. We successfully communicate our dreams, images, perceptions, hallucinations, etc., by means of a great variety of sentence-forms. What good purpose is served by foreswearing this rich diversity and confining ourselves to the sense-datum form, with all the frailties to which this mode of expression is heir? It is to be feared rather that insistence on the exclusive use of a single mode of expression will encourage us to neglect the important differences between various types of perceptual situations, differences which are admirably reflected in the common modes of expression for which, in the last analysis, sense-datum statements are mere reformulations.