

EAE 0422 A

CODE SUJET : EHP

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SUJET JURY

SUJET CANDIDAT N°

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N° 13 of *No Thanks* (1935), in George J. Firmage (ed.) *E. Cummings. Complete Poems 1904-1962*. New York, Liveright, 1991, p.396.

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The primary purpose of the argument from illusion is to induce people to accept 'sense-data' as the proper and correct answer to the question what they perceive on certain *abnormal, exceptional* occasions; but in fact it is usually followed up with another bit of argument intended to establish that they *always* perceive sense-data. Well, what is the argument?

In Ayer's statement¹ it runs as follows. It is 'based on the fact that material things may present different appearances to different observers, or to the same observer in different conditions, and that the character of these appearances is to some extent causally determined by the state of the conditions and the observer'. As illustrations of this alleged fact Ayer proceeds to cite perspective ('a coin which looks circular from one point of view may look elliptical from another'); refraction ('a stick which normally appears straight looks bent when it is seen in water'); changes in colour-vision produced by drugs ('such as mescal'); mirror-images; double vision; hallucination; apparent variations in tastes; variations in felt warmth ('according as the hand that is feeling it is itself hot or cold'); variations in felt bulk ('coin seems larger when it is placed on the tongue than when it is held in the palm of the hand'); and the oft-cited fact that 'people who have had limbs amputated may still continue to feel pain in them'.

He then selects three of these instances for detailed treatment. First, refraction—the stick which normally 'appears straight' but 'looks bent' when seen in water. He makes the 'assumptions' (*a*) that the stick does not *really change its shape* when it is placed in water, and (*b*) that it *cannot be* both crooked and straight.² He then concludes ('it follows') that 'at least one of the *visual appearances* of the stick is *delusive*'. Nevertheless, even when 'what we see is not the *real quality* of a *material thing*, it is supposed that we are still seeing something'— and this something is to be called a 'sense-datum'. A sense-datum is to be 'the object of which we are *directly* aware, in perception, if it is not *part* of any *material thing*'. (The italics are mine throughout this and the next two paragraphs.)

1 Ayer, A.J., *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, Macmillan, 1940, pp. 3-5.

2 It is not only strange, but also important, that Ayer calls these 'assumptions'. Later on he is going to take seriously the notion of denying at least one of them, which he could hardly do if he had recognized them here as the plain and incontestable facts that they are.

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Next, mirages. A man who sees a mirage, he says, is 'not perceiving any material thing; for the oasis which he thinks he is perceiving *does not exist*. But *'his experience* is not an experience of nothing'; thus 'it is said that he is experiencing sense-data, which are similar in character to what he would be experiencing if he were seeing a real oasis, but are delusive in the sense that *the material thing which they appear to present is not really there*'.

Lastly, reflections. When I look at myself in a mirror 'my body *appears to be* some distance behind the glass'; but it cannot actually be in two places at once; thus my perceptions in this case 'cannot all be *veridical*'. But I do see *something*; and if 'there really is no such material thing as my body in the place where it appears to be, what is it that I am seeing?' Answer—a sense-datum. Ayer adds that 'the same conclusion may be reached by taking any other of my examples'.

Now I want to call attention, first of all, to the name of this argument—the 'argument from *illusion*, and to the fact that it is produced as establishing the conclusion that some at least of our 'perceptions' are *delusive*. For in this there are two clear implications—(a) that all the cases cited in the argument are cases of *illusions*; and (b) that *illusion* and *delusion* are the same thing. But both of these implications, of course, are quite wrong; and it is by no means unimportant to point this out, for, as we shall see, the argument trades on confusion at just this point.

What, then, would be some genuine examples of illusion? (The fact is that hardly any of the cases cited by Ayer is, at any rate without stretching things, a case of illusion at all.) Well, first, there are some quite clear cases of *optical* illusion—for instance the case we mentioned earlier in which, of two lines of equal length, one is made to look longer than the other. Then again there are illusions produced by professional 'illusionists', conjurors—for instance the Headless Woman on the stage, who is made to look headless, or the ventriloquist's dummy which is made to appear to be talking. Rather different—not (usually) produced on purpose—is the case where wheels rotating rapidly enough in one direction may look as if they were rotating quite slowly in the opposite direction. Delusions, on the other hand, are something altogether different from this. Typical cases would be delusions of persecution, delusions of grandeur. These are primarily a matter of grossly disordered beliefs (and so, probably, behaviour) and may well have nothing in particular to do with perception.³ But I think we might also say that the patient who sees pink rats has (suffers from) delusions—particularly, no doubt, if, as would

³ The latter point holds, of course, for *some* uses of 'illusion' too; there are the illusions which some people (are said to) lose as they grow older and wiser.

probably be the case, he is not clearly aware that his pink rats aren't real rats.⁴

95 The most important differences here are that the term
'an illusion' (in perceptual context) does not suggest that
something totally unreal is *conjured up*—on the contrary,
there just is the arrangement of lines and arrows on the
page, the woman on the stage with her head in a black
bag, the rotating wheels; whereas the term 'delusion' *does*
100 suggest something totally unreal, not really there at all.
(The convictions of the man who has delusions of
persecution can be *completely* without foundation.) For
this reason delusions are a much more serious matter—
something is really wrong, and what's more, wrong *with*
105 the person who has them. But when I see an optical
illusion, however well it comes off, there is nothing
wrong with me personally, the illusion is not a little (or a
large) peculiarity or idiosyncrasy of my own; it is quite
public, anyone can see it, and in many cases standard
110 procedures can be laid down for producing it.
Furthermore, if we are not actually to be taken in, we
need to be *on our guard*; but it is no use to tell the sufferer
from delusions to be on his guard. He needs to be cured.

J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, reconstructed from the
manuscript notes by G. J. Warnock, Oxford University
Press, 1962, p. 20-24.

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4 Cp. the white rabbit in the play called *Harvey*.



Ralph Goings "*Blue Napkin Holder*", 1978, oil on canvas, 26 x 36"

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