

Chapter 1

Descartes' Problem

1. Conceptual Frameworks

In this book, the concept of a conceptual framework is very important. I shall begin with a brief explanation of what I understand a conceptual framework to be. I could as well speak of linguistic frameworks, or conceptual/linguistic frameworks. For I don't believe in abstract, nonlinguistic concepts simply waiting to be grasped. Nor do I count a nonlinguistic ability to "deal" with things of a kind as a conceptual skill. As a first approximation, we can consider a conceptual framework to be a set of meaningful expressions used for talking about objects of certain sorts. These expressions have various semantic properties and relations to one another. The meaningful expressions and their semantic features constitute the conceptual framework. For example, it is a constitutive principle of our color-concept framework that whatever is scarlet must be red, because being scarlet entails being red.

Anyone who speaks a language has mastered a number of conceptual frameworks. Although the totality of a person's conceptual frameworks could conceivably add up to one coherent but very complicated

conceptual framework, this is unlikely. I will normally speak of conceptual frameworks in the plural. A conceptual framework is not an arbitrary collection of expressions, but has a certain coherence. It is constituted by expressions used for some particular part or aspect of things, or by expressions for some special field or subject. Its distinctive expressions/concepts are characteristic of a conceptual framework, but some expressions belong to many frameworks. Some conceptual frameworks overlap, some are included in others. Different frameworks can also be incompatible alternatives to one another.

While a collection of meaningful expressions with their semantic features is a reasonable first approximation to a conceptual framework, it isn't a conceptual framework. For expressions aren't the primary bearers of meaning. Since nothing "has" a meaning, in the sense of being linked to some kind of meaning object, what I should say is that expressions aren't the primary meaningful objects. That distinction belongs to linguistic acts—acts performed with expressions of a language. The word 'red' isn't itself meaningful, but it is/can be used to perform meaningful acts. The word can be used to represent a certain color or an object of that color. It can be used to acknowledge an object to be of that color. Various kinds of linguistic act are conventionally associated with an expression—the expression is conventionally used to perform the acts. Semantic features of linguistic acts are commonly attributed to the expressions used to perform these acts. A conceptual framework is actually constituted by certain kinds of linguistic acts (by act *types*, not tokens) and by semantic features which can be explained in terms of *commitment*. For example, propositional acts A_1, \dots, A_n *basically entail* propositional act B if performing, and accepting, A_1, \dots, A_n commits a person to performing and accepting B , should the occasion arise. Acknowledging Socrates to be a Greek and all Greeks to be mortal will commit a person to acknowledging Socrates to be mortal, if the question comes up.

Although linguistic acts are the primary bearers of meaning, and conceptual frameworks are constituted by act-types and semantic features based on commitment, it is often convenient to speak as if words and their semantic features made up these frameworks. I will occasionally indulge in this loose talk myself. I may, for example, speak of some sentences entailing another, understanding that it is really acts of using the first sentences to make statements that entail an act of using the further sentence to make a statement. The principles which gov-

ern—which constitute—the framework can be expressed either by sentences which explicitly describe the framework or by sentences which state fundamental truths about the objects with which the framework is concerned. As a simple example, we have both “Anything correctly labelled by ‘scarlet’ will be correctly labelled by ‘red’” and “Anything which is scarlet is (necessarily) red.” Some governing principles are inferential; these authorize inferences from acts performed with certain expressions to acts performed with others. For example, an inference from a statement “A is scarlet” to “A is red” is valid.

Philosophers sometimes claim that two people (or cultures) who employ different conceptual frameworks to deal with the same things, or in similar situations, cannot understand one another. Their views are incommensurable—the two people are doomed to “talk past” one another. I don’t accept this position. It is true that different people might employ different, and conflicting, conceptual frameworks in the same or similar situations. It can even happen that statements in one conceptual framework have no exact or even approximate translations in the other. If the two parties don’t realize what is happening, their attempts at communication may not succeed. But conceptual frameworks aren’t prisons. A person employing one conceptual framework can “step back” and consider the two frameworks with their similarities and differences. Each person can understand how his view differs from the other’s. If he can’t express this with words he already knows, he can introduce new words to serve this purpose. What makes it possible for one framework’s owner to understand the other framework is not a common experience which the two frameworks package differently. It is instead the common semantic features which structure each framework. The persons may not recognize the same basic entailments. But each recognizes the same kind of entailment, and each can determine how the entailments constitutive of the other framework differ from those of his own framework.

Conceptual frameworks provide resources for talking and thinking about the world, or part of it. But a conceptual framework need not be a neutral, noncommittal scheme for classifying and describing objects. Conceptual frameworks typically incorporate substantive information about those things with which they are concerned. A person who accepts and uses a framework is committed to certain views, by virtue of employing the framework. Learning how to talk

about some objects is also, in part, learning what those objects are like. Fundamental scientific theories usually have distinctive conceptual frameworks. But we also have conceptual frameworks for talking about sense experience, about (ordinary) physical objects, and about persons.

A conceptual framework with substantive principles is a theory. It may be an implicit theory, for its principles may never be spelled out. It may also be an explicit theory. The theories incorporated in conceptual frameworks are partial and incomplete. They provide information about features essential to the framework's objects. They don't determine everything that is essential to these objects. As well as telling us what certain kinds of objects are like, the framework provides the resources to say new things about these objects. When the principles of a merely implicit conceptual framework/theory are spelled out, they will frequently seem obvious, or trivial. But conceptual frameworks, even the "obvious" parts of them, can be mistaken. The "fundamental truths" of a conceptual framework may not be true at all.

Deductive systems in logic can serve as models of conceptual frameworks. Deductive systems model spelled-out conceptual frameworks, for the axioms, rules, and results belonging to a deductive system are usually written down, at least in part. In a deductive system which is an adequate model, the theorems will include arguments or argument sequences as well as single sentences or formulas. (I write an argument sequence, or inference sequence, like this: $A_1, \dots, A_n / B$. The slant line separates the premisses from the conclusion.) Consider a system of classical propositional logic based on the connectives ' \sim ' and ' \supset '. There are different deductive systems which can present or express the same conceptual system. Some are axiomatic deductive systems with finitely or infinitely many axioms. Others are natural deduction systems. Semantic tableau systems are still another kind. But natural deduction systems make the most appropriate models of conceptual frameworks. For in a conceptual framework, one both makes statements and proceeds by inferential moves from some statements to others. An axiomatic deductive system doesn't accommodate ordinary statements and inferential moves. Neither does a semantic tableau system.

There are two important kinds of expressions/concepts, and two corresponding kinds of conceptual framework. The first kind is *independently significant*. Such an expression doesn't owe its sig-

nificance to other expressions, and its significance doesn't consist in its relations to other expressions. For an independently significant expression (an independently significant kind of linguistic act), its significance is prior to the semantic relations linking it to other expressions—these relations are consequences of the prior significance. The fundamental criteria for using an independently significant expression might involve sensible appearances. Expressions for sensible qualities like colors appear to be independently significant. Its being independently significant doesn't preclude an expression's being explained using other expressions, but the significance of the expression must finally "come down" to appearances. A conceptual framework whose characteristic concepts are independently significant is *merely classificatory*.

An expression/concept that isn't independently significant is *essentially systematic*. A conceptual framework for which some of the characteristic concepts are essentially systematic is an *essentially systematic* framework. The significance of an essentially systematic concept depends on semantic relations to other concepts. Concepts of unobservable theoretical entities appear to be essentially systematic. An essentially systematic concept must have some ties to experience, but these don't constitute its whole meaning.

What kinds of conceptual frameworks there are is a controversial topic, though the controversy doesn't often surface exactly in terms of concepts and conceptual frameworks. It clearly isn't true that all expressions/concepts are independently significant, but someone might maintain that the fundamental expressions for objects in the world are independently significant, and that systematically significant expressions ultimately owe their significance to their ties to the independently significant expressions. This would presumably make the systematically significant expressions dispensable in favor of independently significant ones, or reducible to independently significant expressions. This issue about concepts and conceptual frameworks has an important bearing on whether there is such a thing as objective knowledge of the way things are independently of us. If certain fundamental concepts or conceptual frameworks are irreducibly systematic, this may show that our knowledge of the world isn't objective—that incompatible accounts of what things are like might be equally successful, so that there would be no basis for claiming that either is incorrect.

What kinds of concepts and conceptual frameworks we actually employ is a topic that will be explored at length in the course of this book. We won't approach these topics in the abstract, but on the basis of our having taken close looks at actual conceptual frameworks.

2. The Ordinary Conception of Sensation: Vision and Touch

We shall first look at the ordinary conceptual framework for dealing with sense experience and its objects. This conceptual framework contains such words as 'see', 'hear', and 'feel', as well as 'table', 'tree', and 'apple'. It is structured by such principles as the one which sanctions the inferences from a sentence ' α sees β ' to ' β exists' and ' β is where α can see it.'

Let us begin by asking what kinds of things we see. A quick answer is that we see physical objects. But in *Sense and Sensibilia*, J. L. Austin has reminded us that we see more than substantial physical objects. We also see physical stuff, like water and sugar. We see physical events, like explosions and collisions. We see surfaces, lines, and points—the limits of physical objects and physical stuff. We see light. We see rainbows and shadows. Everything we see is physical: we see physical phenomena. It is difficult to find one word which fits all the objects of vision. For some of these objects, such as rainbows and shadows, we are hard pressed to say what kinds of things they are. (We can provide scientific explanations of these phenomena, but the ordinary conceptual framework does not provide familiar categories into which to place them.)

As well as seeing objects, stuff, events, and so forth, we also see some of their properties and relations. We see color, shape, size, motion, and spatial relations, among others. We never see just a color, or a shape; we see a colored, shaped object. (We do occasionally talk about a color as if it were a kind of stuff, but we aren't then treating it as a property that can be seen in isolation.) And we never see an object without seeing some of its properties and relations—we can't.

The customary verb for vision is 'see'. As well as using this verb for what we literally see with our eyes, we also use it metaphorically; but we ordinarily have no trouble distinguishing literal from metaphorical uses. Our talk about what we touch is more complicated. The verb 'to touch' does not normally indicate a kind of awareness. When the chair touches the wall, no sensation is involved. And I can touch something without feeling it. The verb for reporting what

we sense by touch is 'feel', but this verb serves many other purposes as well. We use 'feel' for beliefs—"I feel Sandra is a better student than Bob." We use 'feel' for emotions, though the sense of touch isn't involved when we feel happy or sad. (These various uses of 'feel' aren't metaphorical.) There are some cases where it is difficult to tell whether or not a feeling belongs to touch. If we put our hand on something, and feel it, this is definitely touch. So is it if we feel the chair we are sitting in, or the shoe which pinches our foot. It is even a matter of touch if someone swallows a marble, and feels it going down. In these clear cases of touch, we are in contact with the thing, and feel it on its outside. These cases are examples of what I will call "feeling from the outside."

If I poke my arm with a stick, I feel the stick from the outside. This is clearly touch. But I also feel pressure on my arm. I feel this pressure *from the inside*—of my body. It isn't clear to me whether people generally regard what we feel from the inside as belonging to touch. My students frequently insist that it does belong. Feelings from the inside invariably accompany those feelings from the outside which belong to touch. Feelings from the inside at least deserve to be considered together with those feelings that clearly belong to touch. But the feeling of pressure on my arm surely goes in the same category as my feeling heat in my hand or head. I feel heat from the inside when I am in contact with something hot, but also when I am sick. And I feel tickles, twitches, aches, and pains from the inside, when I am not feeling a corresponding object on the outside. We shall understand sensory experience broadly enough to include feelings from the inside, regardless of whether they are a matter of touch.

We feel from the outside pretty much the same kinds of things that we see. We don't feel exactly the same things. Not light, or shadows, or rainbows. Nor do we see everything that we feel. What we feel from the inside is harder to pin down. We feel our own bodies. These are physical objects. We feel physical events, like being hit in the head. It is more difficult to find categories for tickles, headaches, and the various pains that we feel. We have a dual conception of such things as pains. Sometimes we think of them as properties. In this sense, two people might feel the same pain. Or one person might feel the same pain on different occasions, possibly even in different parts of her body. Sometimes we think of pains as concrete individuals, located in time and place (the place is a bodily location). In this sense,

two people couldn't have the same pain. And one person couldn't have the same pain on different occasions—she can only have two pains which are qualitatively identical. Whatever the objects of feeling from the inside are, they aren't immaterial or "spiritual". They are physical phenomena.

Some features we feel from the outside are also visible. We can feel size and shape and spatial relations. But it doesn't seem that we get the same information about these features from touch that we get from vision. It is difficult for me to imagine a miraculously surviving blind race of people inventing geometry. Our feelings of shape and spatial relations don't amount to very much. Properties like warmth and coldness, hardness and softness, and texture are proper to touch. Although we can feel warmth from the inside as well as the outside, the properties of being pleasant (feeling) and painful seem proper to feeling from the inside. (We call something painful either because it feels that way or because it causes pain. It is only the painfulness we feel that belongs to feeling from the inside.)

3. Hearing Problems

Our ordinary conception of hearing is unlike vision and touch in admitting a fundamental and central distinction between direct and indirect objects. *Directly* we hear sounds and noises. *Indirectly* we hear the things that make them. Directly we hear the sound of the car door slamming. Indirectly we hear the car door slam. We hear the indirect object *by means of* the direct object.

We can easily make direct/indirect distinctions for vision and touch. We might say that we see a thing directly when we look right at it, and indirectly when we see the object via its reflection. And we directly feel what contacts our body, and indirectly what we probe with a stick or other rigid object. But these direct/indirect distinctions are not fundamental and central to the senses involved. And for these distinctions, the indirect and direct objects are the same kinds of thing. (Other direct/indirect distinctions can be drawn for vision and touch, which are like the hearing distinction in having different kinds of direct and indirect objects. But these distinctions don't now play an important role in our ordinary conceptual framework.)

When we discuss hearing, my students often claim that, strictly speaking, we hear only sounds and noises. We merely infer the existence of the so-called indirect object. When asked to defend this claim,

they usually point out that we can hear a sound without knowing what made it. So in those cases where we do know the origin of a sound, we are making an inference based either on past experience or on what we presently hear. Their argument isn't successful. For we can also see an object without knowing what it is. Not knowing what something is doesn't prevent us from experiencing it in sensation. As far as the way we talk is concerned, we hear both sounds and the events that produce them. To save the claim about what we hear strictly speaking, we must either reconstrue it as a proposal to talk differently than we now do, or understand it to be the consequence of some other theory than the ordinary theory/conceptual framework for sense experience.

Our conception of sounds is like our conception of pains in having a dual character. We treat sounds as properties when we speak of two pianos making the same sound, or of one piano making the same sound on different occasions. We also treat sounds as particular individuals located in space and time. These individual sounds are the bearers of ordinary (i.e., not higher level) features like pitch, timbre, and volume. One of these sounds travels from its source to our ears, where we hear it. I have a conjecture as to why sounds are treated in this incoherent fashion. I think that originally sounds were conceived as properties of events (and, possibly, also of other things). A number of different factors might have contributed to sounds being reconceived as individuals. For one thing, if we simply hear events, it is hard to understand why we see distant events before we hear them. Unless we can hear events in the past, the event must send something our way, which we (directly) hear when it reaches us. It is more difficult to conceive of hearing events in the past than it is to conceive of hearing individuals produced by past events.

It isn't consistent to treat sounds both as properties of events and as products of events. It takes only a small modification to fix this inconsistency, but no such modification has been incorporated in our ordinary conceptual framework. Philosophers have frequently attempted to develop consistent conceptions/theories of sense experience and its objects, sometimes by modifying the ordinary conceptual framework, and sometimes by coming up with a replacement for it. Anyone who wishes to make sense of her own experience needs a consistent conception. With respect to the ordinary conceptual framework for sense experience, which framework we all employ, it seems

reasonable to develop a modified, “cleaned-up” version of this framework. This cleaned-up version should be only modestly different from the ordinary framework, incorporating changes needed to remove inconsistencies and bad fits with experience. I will sketch the outlines of a revised conceptual framework, and call it *the* cleaned-up version of the ordinary framework, even though different cleaned-up versions are possible. In my cleaned-up version, sounds are not properties of events. Sounds are objects produced by events. We can continue to speak of sound and sounds as we always have. But from the standpoint of the cleaned-up version, it is correct to say such things as this: Strictly speaking, two pianos don’t make the same sound; though they might make sounds which are acoustically indistinguishable.

The cleaned-up version of the ordinary conceptual framework eliminates an inconsistency of the ordinary framework. But it still leaves many things to be determined about sounds. For one thing, how are sounds to be identified, and counted? Does an event like the car door slamming make one sound, which occupies a lot of space, and spreads out in all directions from its source, or does it produce many sounds? And what kinds of things are sounds—objects, stuff, events? Or perhaps they are nondescript entities, like rainbows and shadows. I won’t develop the cleaned up version in full detail, though I will make several contributions to this theory. The task of filling in the details can be regarded as a philosophical exercise.

With the cleaned-up version of the ordinary conception of sensation in mind, it makes sense to say that, strictly speaking, the same sound doesn’t occur twice. I don’t think there is a theory/conceptual framework which makes sense of my students’ assertion that, strictly speaking, we only hear sounds, not the events that make them. Such a theory might be developed, but the students haven’t done so. They seem to feel that the scientific understanding of things calls for a theory which makes such a claim. But this isn’t apparent to me.

4. Double Vision

Directly we hear sounds and their properties and relations. Indirectly we hear events that make sounds, but we don’t hear many of their properties. We hear these events begin and end. The other properties of sounds don’t also characterize the events. The sense of smell resembles hearing in having direct and indirect objects. Directly we smell aromas, scents, odors, stenches, and smells. Indirectly we smell

what give these off. But it seems that the properties of smells, which we don't have many words for, may also belong to the objects that produce them. For the properties we smell resemble those we taste, and the ones we taste belong to the objects we taste. Some objects smell like they taste, although many smell better than they taste. In spite of the connections between smell and taste, we conceive taste like touch, not hearing. We must contact (with our tongues and mouths) the things we taste.

Our conception of vision may not be modeled on our conception of touch (of feeling from the outside), but it surely resembles touch more than it does hearing. We talk of vision as if our eyes made contact with their objects. And there is no central direct/indirect distinction for vision, in spite of the fact that the physical situation when we see something is similar to that when we hear. We both hear and see distant items. With hearing we do this by means of objects which travel from the items to our ears. Why don't we think of vision this way? After all, doesn't light from the objects have to reach our eyes before we can see?

Let us briefly consider an alternative to the present conception of vision, one which treats vision analogously to the way we treat hearing. On this alternative, the distant objects that we see are indirect objects of vision. We need a word for the direct objects of vision. We might press the noun 'sight' into service for this job. Then just as we directly hear sounds, so we will directly see sights. This would be a new meaning for 'sight', since, at present, the sights that we see are simply the distant objects. We might also say that the direct objects are images (optical images). But if we choose this word, we must take care not to confuse the images we see directly with either neural or mental images that we apprehend with "the mind's eye." To fully develop this alternative conception of vision, we must determine whether the direct objects of vision travel from the distant objects to our eyes, or the light traveling from the distant objects produces the image(s) when it contacts our eyes. In either case, the direct object of vision must resemble the indirect object far more closely than the direct object of hearing resembles its indirect object. For, presumably, both images and their objects will have colors, shapes, sizes, motion, and so on.

When it comes to talking about the objects we see around us, the alternative conception of vision would be more trouble to employ than the ordinary conception. And it offers few conversational

advantages. But our understanding that light has a finite velocity, and the possibility of “seeing” stars after their demise, shows that the ordinary conception of vision doesn’t fit our experience very well. (It makes no better sense to presently see past stars than it does to presently hear past events.) This is reason enough for incorporating the alternative conception of vision in the cleaned up version of the ordinary conceptual framework.

5. Illusory Appearances

Some philosophers have criticized the ordinary conceptual framework for being unable to accommodate the distinction between appearance and reality. In many situations an object appears different than it really is. In a blue light, a yellow grapefruit appears green. Water in a bowl can appear colder to the left hand than it does to the right hand—if the left hand has just been immersed in a bowl of warm water and the right hand has been immersed in cold water. Lines equal in length can appear unequal if oppositely aimed arrowheads are drawn at their ends. Even when the grapefruit looks green, it is still yellow. We can explain that the yellow grapefruit reflects green light, but we see the grapefruit, not the light.

On the ordinary conception, we don’t see anything green, only something which appears green. In *Sense and Sensibilia*, J. L. Austin made clear that this is not an inconsistency or fatal flaw of the ordinary conceptual framework. But why should it have ever been regarded as a difficulty?

On the ordinary conception, the yellow grapefruit looks green in blue light. Yellow appears to be green in blue light. But nothing we see in that situation is green. Compared to a different framework which holds that something we see really is green, the ordinary framework is at a disadvantage. The framework which has us really seeing something green is more explanatory. The grapefruit looks green because something other than the grapefruit is green, and we see this something other. The ordinary framework doesn’t explain the grapefruit’s looking green, it just “tells us” that the grapefruit does look that way. Appearing green in blue light is an ultimate fact about yellow objects—as far as the ordinary framework is concerned. A framework which “reduces” this fact to some others is more explanatory with respect to this phenomenon. And more explanatory theories are better than less explanatory ones.

Once we accept the alternative conception of vision, so that we see both direct and indirect objects, the grapefruit situation will be described differently. Now we will say that the yellow grapefruit produces a green image. Yellow objects produce green images/sights in blue light. The cleaned-up version of the ordinary conceptual framework is more explanatory than the original version when it comes to appearances involving color. But the cleaned-up version won't similarly accommodate all cases of the appearance-reality distinction. When the one line looks longer than the other, its image also looks longer than the other's. The water still feels different to the one hand than to the other. An object with one property can appear to have a different property. One property can appear to be a different property. In such cases it isn't necessary that anything really have the property the object only appears to have.

An illusion occurs when an object appears to have a property it doesn't really possess. An hallucination occurs when a person appears to sense an object that doesn't exist. The line between illusions and hallucinations may not be sharp. The heat-crazed wanderer in the desert who spots an oasis which turns out not to be where he thinks it is may be subject to an illusion. Some features of the way light is reflected may cause a real oasis to appear to be in a different location than it really is. But if the oasis is all in the wanderer's head, he is having an hallucination. Although *he* thinks differently, he isn't seeing anything.

The facts of there being illusions and hallucinations don't require that the ordinary conceptual framework for sense experience and its objects be abandoned. The presence of words like 'looks' and 'appears' gives this framework the resources to describe what goes on without requiring us to claim that when α looks ϕ to John, there must really be something ϕ which John experiences. The ordinary framework is not undone by illusions and hallucinations. But it doesn't provide explanations for these phenomena either. The ordinary framework is at a disadvantage with respect to frameworks/theories that do provide explanations. This disadvantage isn't in itself so important that a person should be eager to abandon the ordinary conception of sense experience and its objects.

In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell exploits the appearance-reality distinction to launch a more sophisticated argument against the ordinary conceptual framework. He questions this

framework's ability to certify those (sensible) features that objects really have. An object may appear to have many different colors in different situations. Since every apparent color has an equally good claim to be the true color of the object we see (and so on for all other sensible features), we must simply abandon the view that we can tell by sensing what the true properties of a thing are. The features we sense must not even belong to external objects, which leads us to abandon the claim that we sense independent external objects and their features.

The ordinary conceptual framework is equipped with principles enabling us to determine the true properties (and relations) of a thing. Russell challenges the ordinary framework to justify itself with respect to merely potential alternatives. But as addressed to a conceptual framework/theory which is a going concern (which is widely accepted and employed), Russell's criticism is idle. We don't need to show that the theories we accept are the best of all possible theories. We must accept certain fundamental theories and their conceptual frameworks if we are to make sense of our experience and the world where we find ourselves. We cannot simply abandon our most fundamental theories/conceptual frameworks. We can "trade in" one for another. But we should only do this if the one runs into difficulties which its replacement solves. Russell has not uncovered a true difficulty, and the replacement he proposed is unworkable.

6. Sensible Activity

As far as our ordinary conceptual framework is concerned, when we have a sensation—when we see, or hear, or feel something—we are *doing* something. Seeing a tree is an act or activity which we do with our eyes. I feel the surface of the table with my hand. We talk about our sensings in much the same way we talk about other instrumental acts. Just as I drive nails, or fasten boards together, with a hammer, so I hear music with my ears. The sense organ is the instrument I use to perform my sensing acts. Each of the five external senses has a sense organ that we employ to enjoy (to perform) the relevant sensings. But for feeling from the inside, there seems to be no sense organ. I feel the door with my hand, but I don't use anything to feel my headache, or to feel the pressure on my arm. When I feel from the inside, I am aware of a state or condition of my body, and I don't need an instrument to accomplish the awareness. This is probably a decisive reason, if one is needed, for saying that feeling from the inside does not count as touch.

Although we conceive sensings as instrumental acts, they differ in certain respects from acts performed with “external” instruments. I drive nails with a hammer and I see with my eyes, but I have less control over my seeing than I do over my hammering. I can be in the presence of a hammer without using it. I can just let it lie on the table. Or I can hold it but refrain from pounding anything. When my eyes are open in the light, I can’t help seeing. And so long as I am facing a certain direction, I can’t determine what I will see. (Of course, I can cause certain things to be present, and so seen. I can’t, simply by using my eyes, determine what I will see.)

If there is something I don’t want to see, I can look the other way. Or I can move myself to a new location, from which the original sight isn’t visible. I can also shut my eyes. But these strategies don’t “shut off” my eyes. They either block my seeing a particular object by keeping that object out of sight. Or they block seeing by imposing a barrier between my eyes and their objects. So long as my eyes are open in the light, I can’t help using them. I have even less control over hearing and touch. I am not equipped with earlids. I can’t help hearing the sounds in my vicinity. And I can’t help feeling things that touch my body—to keep from feeling them I must stay out of their way.

When the circumstances are right, I can’t keep from using my sense organs. But I do have some control over the manner in which they are used. As well as simply seeing and hearing, I can also look and listen. I can do something analogous for the other senses, though there are no special words to describe this. I can direct my sensing in various directions, and can focus attention on this or that aspect of what I am sensing.

I do have some control over my sensing, but less control than I have over my hammering (or sawing, etc.). Many philosophers have given the absence of control as a reason for saying that we are passive in sensation. According to them, sensing is not something we do; sensing happens to us. However, the active-passive distinction is basically a linguistic distinction. The agent acts on the patient because this is how we describe (and conceive) it. The agent verbs the patient. The patient is verbed by the agent. The agent typically initiates and sustains the action. There is no requirement that the action result from choice or be voluntary. Nor that the agent make some special effort. The claim that in sensing we are passive isn’t one that can be supported by introspection or rational analysis. This claim is (in part) constitutive of a certain

conception of sense experience, one that is incompatible with the ordinary conception of sense experience. The way we talk about sensing reveals, and constitutes, the ordinary conception of sensation. There are some circumstances in which we have a different way of describing sensing. For vision, the verb 'show' can be used so that the object seen is the "agent," as in "The wallpaper shows through the paint." If we conceived of seeing as passive, we would commonly and customarily talk of things showing to us instead of being seen by us. And similarly for the other senses. We don't normally talk in this passive fashion. If we spoke this way in a normal conversation, we wouldn't be understood. As we ordinarily talk and think, when we sense we are doing something, as opposed to having something done to us.

There is also a linguistic argument to the effect that in sensing, we aren't performing actions. This argument works best for languages that resemble English with respect to sentences about what is going on at present. In English, the simple present tense isn't used for describing events currently taking place. Instead we use a form of the verb 'to be' with an '-ing' attached to the main verb:

The clock is ticking.
The sun is shining.
David is jogging.

A sentence formed with the simple present tense is normally used to indicate that an event (action) is repeated or habitual. To say "David jogs" is to say that he frequently or regularly jogs, not that he is jogging at this moment. And similarly with the other sentences. There *is* a "play-by-play" use of the simple present, as in:

He takes a long lead off first base. He runs to second. He slides.

But this is not the customary, conversational way to represent current events.

With verbs for states or conditions, we can use the present tense for the present time:

The pillar supports the roof.
Mary has the measles.

Chuck owns a BMW.
The branch touches the wire.

Sometimes we can also use the '-ing' form:

The pillar is supporting the roof.
The branch is touching the wire.

(There is no difference between what goes on at present and what goes on habitually.) Sometimes we can't:

Mary is having the measles.
Chuck is owning a BMW.

Some verbs associated with sensation—such as 'look' and 'listen'—behave like normal verbs for events/actions. But the principal verbs associated with each sense do not. To talk about what is going on right now, we say:

Carolyn sees the two birds.
Ken hears what Jim is saying.
Dick feels a rock in his shoe.
Barry smells the dead skunk.
I taste oregano in the spaghetti sauce.

With 'see', we use the '-ing' form for habitual encounters:

Mary is seeing Bob.

Though we can also use the '-ing' form for what is taking place right now:

We are seeing a beautiful sunset.

We can represent habitual occurrences for the sense of hearing like this:

I am hearing good reports about Carol.

Though we can also say, “I hear good reports about Carol from everyone I talk to.” With touch, we use both the simple present and the ‘-ing’ form for current events:

Dick feels a rock in his shoe, and he is feeling the surface of the desk with his right hand.

We wouldn’t say that Dick is feeling a rock in his shoe, though we can say that he feels the surface with his right hand. Taste is like touch:

Jorge is tasting a wine from Burgundy. He tastes its characteristic richness.

And smell is like hearing:

I am smelling dead skunks wherever I drive.

Though I can also say “I smell dead skunks wherever I drive.”

The linguistic evidence suggests that English speakers don’t conceive sensing to be exactly on a par with other actions. It doesn’t show us to conceive sensing as passive. Sensings are to a large extent like actions performed with instruments, though we speak of them as we do states or conditions. Even for states and conditions, we distinguish “agents” from patients. The pillar supports the roof. The roof is supported by the pillar. Though it is also true that the roof rests on the pillar, and the pillar is rested on by the roof. It is interesting to speculate why we describe sensing like a state or condition instead of as an action/event. Whatever the reason, it seems to have no great importance. The actual locutions we use don’t reveal how we conceive the world. It is the semantic, inferential relations between saying one thing and saying something else that are constitutive of our conception of sensation. For example, if we accept Leonard Talmy’s analysis (1990), we can agree that we speak about seeing as if there were something that came out of our eyes and made contact with the objects we see. This way of talking may reflect an ancient belief. But it has no significance at present. If it did, we would accept the claim that seeing is like this. Which we don’t—we *merely* talk that way.

Sensing is conceived as something we do, not something which happens to us. Except for feeling from the inside, sensing is performed

with a sense organ. In sensing, we encounter, we act on, an object. My eyes are what I see with. But seeing with my eyes is doing something, doing something to the object of vision. The object acted on is an essential ingredient of a sensation. However, sensing is not intentional. We can look for something on purpose, but we don't see something on purpose. Sensing with our sense organs is similar to breathing with our lungs. We are active in seeing, hearing, and so forth, and also in breathing. We can exert control over our breathing—we can hold our breath, breathe rapidly or slowly. But we don't *intend* to be breathing, we simply find ourselves breathing (and are normally content to be doing it). We don't intend to see or hear, either. We just find ourselves doing these things.

Although neither breathing nor sensing are intentional activities, they are surely purposive—they serve functions. We breathe in order to introduce oxygen into our blood; we sense in order obtain information about ourselves and our surroundings. It seems odd to speak of the purpose of a particular occurrence of breathing, but if we breathe in order to obtain oxygen, then breathing on a particular occasion must also have the purpose of obtaining oxygen on that occasion. (However, taking a particular breath may be an intentional act—one performed to satisfy the doctor's instruction.) It is similar for sensing. (And we can intentionally obey someone's command "Come and see my new dress.")

7. Descartes' Problem

The ordinary conception of sense experience is sometimes described as a commonsense view—and it is. But, among philosophers anyway, 'common sense' has a somewhat pejorative flavor, which 'ordinary conception' does not. And the description fails to highlight the fundamental character of the view. If something is merely a matter of common sense, then we might abandon it without much difficulty if we found a more enlightened position. The ordinary conception of sense experience and its objects is more deeply engrained. Indeed, this conception seems to have been with us forever. Our ordinary conception seems to be about the same (maybe even exactly the same) as the ordinary conception at the time of Descartes. Nothing I have read in Plato or Aristotle suggests that the ancient Greeks had a different conception. On the ordinary conception, which we share with our ancestors, we encounter physical phenomena in sensation. The objects of

sensation don't simply cause us to have sensations. These objects are literally constituents of our sensations, and we act on these constituents in sensing them. Without the objects no sensations take place. Which explains the entailment from the sensation to the existence of its object.

Our understanding of the world we live in owes a lot to both sense experience and our conception of sense experience. We know what space and spatial relations are like because we see them, and because we know how to describe them. Our understanding of the world goes beyond what experience "teaches." But the understanding we get from seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting is the basic understanding on which our more sophisticated understanding rests—even when the more sophisticated understanding corrects this basic understanding.

The ordinary conceptual framework for sense experience has various shortcomings. It treats sounds in inconsistent ways. It doesn't "allow" for the finite velocity of light, and the present seeing based on light from past events. Such shortcomings as these can be corrected in the cleaned-up version of the ordinary framework. However, there is a more serious difficulty which confronts the ordinary conception of sensation. This conception conflicts with our understanding of the physical world, and of the way things work. This conflict "surfaced" at the time of Descartes, and I give him the credit for having called attention to it.

During Descartes' time, the understanding of the physical world was changing in a mechanical "direction." This change started before Descartes came along, and continued after he left the scene. But Descartes was a major "player" in developing and promoting the change. On the mechanical understanding, the same fundamental principles govern the "operation" of all things, both sublunar and otherwise, both natural and artificial. The principles that cover nonliving things also cover at least a large part of the functioning of living things. The mechanical, causal principles that apply to natural and artificial things, and to living and nonliving things, don't provide a role for final causes. We explain what is going on in one place in terms of what has gone on in this and other places, and not in terms of future goals. The mechanical conception of physical processes is called "mechanical" because its early proponents often compared natural processes to