ON THE PROPOSITIONAL RELATION THEORY OF PERCEPTION

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By considering our perception in terms of a "propositional relation," Ernest Sosa has proposed a modified version of the sense-data theory, which may be called the propositional relation theory of perception.1 Despite his concise and elegant construction of the theory, there remain some unclear points. One of its troubles consists in his assumption of propositions as objects of our experience. Although he did not characterize the notion of phenomenal proposition, we may surmise that it is a kind of abstract entity existing in a subject's mind, corresponding to and describing his perceptual state of affairs. If so, it is not clear how to understand Sosa's expressions, "Objects of visual experience may be thought of as vision-phenomenal propositions" (EI, p. 81), "One can visually experience the vista" (II, p. 490), and "One sees the vista" (II, p. 497). Do these mean that, when we look at a snowball, our visual object is not that snowball, but a proposition constituted by its properties? What kind of perceptual mechanism holds in our seeing a proposition? It seems more appropriate to say that, in such a case, we can have a proposition that a certain object is such-and-such.

Apart from its expressional awkwardness, such a proposition cannot be said to be an object of our experience even in accordance with Sosa's suggestion. The reason is that, once a proposition becomes the object of our experience, there must be another proposition describing that object, and further this proposition requires the third proposition in order for it to be our object of that experience, ad infinitum. Of course, what Sosa wanted to say would not be like this. Thus I wish to understand Sosa's notion of phenomenal proposition as a sort of mental content, more specifically, perceptual content.

Once Sosa admits this interpretation, he should show what kind of relation holds between an external object and its corresponding phenomenal proposition. But there is no concrete explanation about such a relation on his part.

When our perceptual content is supposed to be a sort of proposition, moreover, there seems no way to explain infants' perception. When they perceive something, can we say that they have certain propositions about that object? Do their propositions have the same form as ours? If infants have propositions about the external world, what is a proposition, indeed? Do their propositions have a certain truth-value like ours? At this point, Sosa's notion of proposition becomes mysterious.

In order to explain hallucination, Sosa introduces the notion of sense-data and identifies sense-data with images. Are sense-data really identical with images? When we see a snowball, some sense-data theorists may say, the sense-data of the object are whiteness, roundness, coldness, and so on. When we imagine (or have an image of) a snowball, we can recognize at least our awareness of roundness of the image. Is it not more correct to say that the roundness is a sense-datum of the snowball-image? If so, then it seems absurd to identify sense-data with images, because they turn out to be distinct. Sosa might take sense-data for images in that both of them are the objects of our direct awareness. But this can be no reason to neglect their distinct natures.

Although we accept Sosa's identification of sense-data with images, another question may be raised: what is the relation between an image and its phenomenal proposition, especially in the case of hallucination? Sosa remarks that, even though there may be no real sand whose whiteness is seen when one dreams of a white beach, there is an expanse of white in the vista of the dream and that that expanse of white is something whose whiteness is seen when one sees the vista (II, p. 497). Here we may suppose that images are related with phenomenal propositions in that our seeing the former depends on our seeing the latter. Does this mean that there are two objects of our hallucination? If so, what kind of mechanism holds when we see them? Are the two seeings of the same kind? Seeing propositions and seeing images seem different because it has been experimentally proved that persons can rotate their images. That is, if what we see is propositions rather than (pictorial) images, we cannot perform such a mental rotation. Thus we have to decide which of image and proposition is the real object of our experience. But Sosa stands mute to these questions.

Let me examine Sosa's solutions to the puzzles about sense-data. For advocating the private nature of sense-data, he introduces the notion of profile of an image. According to his characterization, when we drop the quantifier of introduction of an image in a description of a certain visual experience, we obtain a property aptly named the profile of that image for