THE SELF-CONSCIOUS POWER OF SENSORY KNOWLEDGE

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Summary
The essay develops a disjunctive account of perception, showing that it needs to be renamed ‘self-conscious power account’. For it is by reference to a self-conscious power of sensory knowledge that, on the one hand, the unity of perception and illusion and, on the other hand, the priority of perception over illusion, specifically, its priority in knowledge, is understood. The concept of a self-conscious power thus transpires as lying at the basis of a sound epistemology and response to sceptical arguments such as the argument from illusion.

1. A form of explaining judgment

In many an epistemological treatise, one finds the following argument. Suppose I think $p$, and someone asks me, Why do you think this? Because $q$, I say. My answer attracts the same question. Why think $q$?, I will be asked. And unless I can answer this question, I will not have answered the original question. For, if there is no reason for thinking $q$, then $q$ affords no reason for thinking $p$. After a few familiar moves, it transpires that I am in principle unable to say why I think what I think. (See, e.g., BonJour 1985, 17–25, and Williams 2001, 58–68.)

I may explain that I think one thing because I think another. Here, my account gives something of the same kind as that for which it accounts, hence something that requires the same kind of account. But this does not seem to be the only way in which I may answer the question. I can say, for example, that I think something because I perceive or have perceived it. Here the question does not re-apply to my answer. One cannot ask again, Why think this?, for I did not offer something I think. I said I perceived what I, therefore, think. So it seems there are two forms of answering the question, Why think this? One introduces a new content—$q$ as the ground of $p$—to which I bear the same relation as I do to the old one: I think $p$,
and I think \( q \). The other does not introduce a new content, but re-describes my relation to the content in question: I not only think, but I perceive \( p \).

But is not this distinction spurious? You say you think something because you perceive it is so. But how do you know you perceive this? It has happened to you, has it not, that you thought you perceived something while in truth you did not. So when you say, I perceive, you give something you think. You think you perceive. But why do you think you perceive? We have made no progress.

This line of reasoning denies that the two ways of saying why differ in form. It maintains that ‘I think \( p \) because I perceive it’ is of the form ‘I think \( p \) because I think \( q \)’, ‘I perceive \( p \)’ taking the place of ‘\( q \)’. My answer is, really, ‘I think \( p \) because I think I perceive it’. I introduce a new content. It is a special content, to be sure—it includes the first person, a cognitive verb, and the original content—but a new content nevertheless, to which I bear the same relation as I do to the old one: it is something I think. Hence, it is proper to ask me why I think it.

If ‘I perceive it’, said in response to the question, Why think \( p \)?, gave a content of which I could be asked why I think it, it would be a pointless answer. For ‘I perceive \( p \)’ contains ‘\( p \)’. Thus I cannot know I perceive \( p \) without knowing \( p \), which appears to entail that I cannot know \( p \) on the basis of knowing I perceive \( p \). However, ‘I perceive it’, said in response to the question, Why think it?, does not seem to be pointless. It must be wrong to assimilate it to an answer that gives something else that I think.

Perhaps this is too hasty. Does not John McDowell teach that we must not assume that, I quote, ‘a basis for a judgment must be something on which we have a firmer cognitive purchase than we do on the judgment itself’? (McDowell 1982, 385). Let it be that I do not know I perceive \( p \) independently of knowing \( p \). We ought not to conclude that this prevents me from explaining why I think \( p \) by the fact that I perceive it.

However, suppose I say, I think \( p \) because I think \( p \land q \) (\( p \) and \( q \) being logically independent propositions). What is wrong with this? It is true: I do not have a firmer cognitive purchase on \( p \land q \) than I do on \( p \). But McDowell said that was fine. Now, I quoted McDowell out of context. He would not approve of this application of his principle. The context makes it clear that his point is that, in my explanation ‘I think \( p \) because I perceive it’, ‘I perceive \( p \)’ does not bear the form ‘\( p \land q \)’. For, this is a

1. Compare the general introduction of this difference in Andrea Kern’s Quellen des Wissens, Kern (2006), 68.