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On the Nonexistence of Perceptions

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Abstract: Perceptions as philosophers understand them are absolutely crucial for grounding problems of knowledge, problems of appearances and reality, the dreaming argument and the argument from illusion. In other words, they are crucial to the existence of epistemology. But no arguments for their existence as philosophers understand them are sound, and investigation into their existence by way of nonphilosophical examples betrays them. What do exist are quite different entities with different logics in different and specific examples, not all examples of seeing and hearing and touching etc. as the problems require. It follows that investigations of the nature of these nonentities is a posterior problem, to be taken up after the discipline returns to the drawing board.

Keywords: Perceptions; ordinary language philosophy; certainty; Austin; Wittgenstein.

I argue here for the claim that perceptions as philosophers have understood them (and as many others guided by philosophers have understood them) do not exist. There are hosts of interesting linked political and historical and psychological issues around these questions—if perceptions don't exist, why in the world have so many apparently fierce and tough-minded thinkers rolled over for these mythological beasts? I'm going to pass all those by.

This essay is a response to the traditional issues of appearance and reality, to the dreaming argument and the argument from illusion, as well as later scholastic rescue
missions (like the closure principle and debates about whether perceptions have conceptual content or are only fraught with relations to subjects and objects) which take perceptions to be present in all cases of people seeing or hearing or touching or etc. If my argument is correct, then those problems and those arguments have something seriously wrong with the thinking which underlies them. The argument from illusion and the dreaming argument require the ubiquitous existence of some things which in fact do not exist except in quite particular cases. These things are perceptions/appearances/the way things seem to me now/the way things look to me now. Without the ubiquitous existence of those things not only is there no answer to the problem but there’s no problem. This essay, then, results not in an answer to the problem but instead in the problem’s dissolving or evaporating. That result occurs based on clarifying how, when, and in which examples perceptions do exist. They exist, not as philosophers take them to exist, whenever any of us sees or hears, but rather only in particular kinds of examples of our seeing or hearing or etc., often examples in which whether we are, for example, seeing aright. Again, they do not exist in all examples as the problems of epistemology require.

Russell begins his *The Problems of Philosophy* with not one but a nest of problems. Appearance and reality, after all, is not only a problem about what exists besides appearances; it also is a problem about how appearances may be a source of knowledge, a problem about the nature of perceptions or appearances themselves, a problem about human beings' sensory apparatus and psychology. It is a problem about the nature of reality but also is about the knowability of reality; it is a problem in part about the relation of body to mind (since appearances are taken to be mental objects), a problem about the relation between subjectivity and objectivity, about privacy within the
mind and the public reality outside, and perhaps a problem about human alienation from the world. We are, in other words, at the headwaters of a large and complex philosophical watershed.

Here’s a reminder what we mean by *appearances* when we are doing philosophy. We mean a family of things, designated by vocabulary largely interchangeable with each other. We mean how things look to us, how they seem to us, what it is like to see things, how things are perceived by us--where perceived is to be distinguished from the purely mechanical and biological workings of our senses--and we mean these things to be in contrast with the reality or the possible reality of the matter when we are being careful to designate our immediate experiences of things from our judgments based on those experiences. One aspect of this meaning which has found its way into the talk of educated persons so much that it is no longer controversial is our talk of perceptions. Psychology texts now regularly tell high school and college students that the psychology of sensation and perception involves a distinction between, on the one side, the causal workings of the world, including our biological and neurological apparatus of eyes and ears (the working of which is called sensing) and, on the other, the seemings, looks, aspects, qualia, experiences which result within us from those causal workings. And both these are to be distinguished from human belief systems about the world which are based at least in part on our sensations and perceptions. Perceptions talk, in other words, is a contemporary way to get at what is meant by *appearances* talk in philosophy. Indeed, one suspects it works along with qualia on the assembly line station once occupied by sense data.

Consider the argument from illusion, in the following form

The way that things look/seem/appear/are perceived right now could be the same
whether the result of illusion/dream/hypnosis/psychedelic-drugs/hallucination/delusion or the result of reality. Therefore I cannot tell the difference. Therefore I cannot tell that I am not now suffering from some illusion/etc. Therefore I do not know that the world is as I perceive it to be.

This argument has been thought by many philosophers to establish the need for epistemology or philosophy of knowledge. The argument from illusion has also been taken to establish the problematic nature of human knowledge of the external world. In its more narrow version as the dreaming argument it has proven itself remarkably invulnerable to attack--no suggestion of certain signs by which I may know I am not now dreaming will stand against the logical possibility that the suggested sign, even if is is applicable in the present moment, could be dreamed.

First, there is a problem in that the argument is framed in such a way as to take Cartesian dualism for granted. Look at the wording of the first premise: “The way that things look/seem/appear/are perceived right now could be the same whether the result of illusion/dream/hypnosis/psychedelic-drugs/hallucination/delusion or the result of reality.” Whatever else is being done by the subject of the sentence, it clearly refers to mental phenomena, and then the phrase “whether the result of illusion/dream/hypnosis/psychedelic-drugs/hallucination/delusion or the result of reality” divides the possible causes of the mental things referred to in the subject into those causes which are mental on one hand (the illusions) or physical on the other (reality). Another way to say this objection is that the argument from illusion begs the question of whether there are the private internal perceptions upon which we allegedly build our inferences about the public external world. That is, those internal perceptions are taken to be mental results not because it is argued that they are and not because we have gone to check any
perceptions to find out whether they are private or mental, but because we take it for granted that they are. In other words, though the argument looks like an argument for the difficulty of bridging a gap between appearances and reality, it establishes that gap not by argument but by building it in at the beginning, using terms which import the gap. The charge then is that the argument from illusion requires but does not establish the ubiquitous existence of perceptions, which come trailing clouds of problems but are needed for the argument.

There is only one alternative can save the argument from this charge. That alternative, that rescue, requires we independently establish that there are clearly all the time the appearances/perceptions/seemings/looks which the argument from illusion requires. Here is how that would go. Take seeing things first. Whenever I see something, there is a way that that something looks to me. Similarly, supposedly, whenever I hear something, there is a way that that something sounds to me, and generally my perceiving something involves there being a way that something seems to me and is perceived by me and appears to me. This is not an unknown thought. The story that Berkeley tells along the way to claiming that material objects do not exist, or the story in Hindu philosophy of the veil of Maya, or the story about perception generally told by contemporary psychology textbooks, if true, would save the argument from illusion. Between my seeing and the world, if this alternative is true, lie perceptions (or, to invoke some technical terms, qualia or sense data), such that my seeing is really seeing of an intermediary, and my understanding of what I see is in part inferential, based on processing the appearances/perceptions/looks/seemings in order to make judgements about the existence of the real things which lie underneath and which cause those seemings.
We might attempt to establish that this alternative is true, and thus rescue the existence of perceptions and rescue the problems, by sketching out how we have to perceive things, and finding in that sketch a requirement that perceptions are always present. This too is not an unknown thought. That sketching out would look like this. Like Russell, I look out my office window, and I see the redwoods into which the great white egrets come to roost about now each evening. That, my seeing, works as follows. There is the sun, which shines light on all, including the redwoods; most of the light is absorbed but a little gets reflected off in all directions A tiny fraction of what gets reflected gets reflected toward me and strikes the front of my eye. It is there gathered and focused by the lens and humors of the eye onto the retina, is there converted by nerve cells including the rods and cones into neurochemical impulses which travel up the optic nerve to the visual centers of the brain, which gather and process them in order to construct a representation of what I see, such that finally there crawls over the boundary between body and mind a tiny thing, a perception, which in this case is the way the redwoods look to me or the way I experience the redwoods. Russell says, "Although we are doubting the physical existence of the table, we are not doubting the existence of the sense-data which made us think there was a table; we are not doubting that, while we look, a certain colour and shape appear to us, and while we press, a certain sensation of hardness is experienced by us. All this, which is psychological, we are not calling in question. In fact, whatever else may be doubtful, some at least of our immediate experiences seem absolutely certain."

I find this problematic. The story is not a story of what is found either in experience or in the brain but instead is a story of what we project into the brain and into our experience, as if we were shining our junior batlight into the example looking for bats
and triumphantly seeing the shadow of the silhouette we have on the lens. The account of physiology of the eye and neurophysiology of the visual system has nothing wrong with it but does not include anything about the results being the way things look to us. If the argument of this paper is right, one consequence is that those brain researchers who are hoping some day to provide the neurological account of how I get a perception of the redwoods when I see them--they can give up that task and go do something less nonsensical.

Now, alas, sometimes there are perceptions. They are not however as the causal theory of perception says. They occur in particular kinds of cases. Those are frequently cases in which the reliability of what we see is at issue, cases in which there is something problematic about our senses, cases in which the thing seen is peculiar or improbable so we doubt our senses enough that we want to hedge our bets, and some other kinds of cases. But that it is in those cases that perceptions show up supports the idea that they don’t show up in the cases in which, well, they don’t show up. We can think that they show up in all cases only by forgetting the kinds of circumstances in which they do show up and by forgetting those details which make sense of their showing up. And careful attention to the other cases in which our rescue attempt needs us to come up with seemings, looks, perceptions or appearances, reveals their conspicuous absence.

Russell, for instance, tells us in Chapter Three of *The Problems of Philosophy* that a coin looks oval unless we are looking at it straight on. In Chapter One, talking about the table which looks oblong in different proportions to those whose points of view around the table are different, he brings up the art student as someone who needs to be aware of these matters because they will endeavour to draw the table, not as it is, but as it looks.
With these remarks as guides and as temptations, we can check against cases.

We can imagine teaching a class of eight- and nine-year-olds how to draw, setting for them various tasks, including a still life with some coins in it. When one of the students draws circles for the coins though he is off to one side we could tell her, "Now think how the coins appear as you move from directly above them off to one side" [drawing on the blackboard a circle, then a couple or three ellipses of increasing eccentricity, then a double line with milling marks to portray the edge only of the coin] "until you get to a position where you can see only the edge of the coin. From here at your easel, which of these ovals matches best how the coins look?"

When teaching drawing, then, coins look oval when seen from an angle. Here’s a case in which coins look oval. “Perception” is a little toney, but we can let it go.

Imagine another case. You are a police detective for a local community, come back to the University to finish your degree so you can get a promotion. Coming back to your first meeting of the Intro to Philosophy course after the Spring Break week off, you enter the classroom to find a group of shocked and horrified students standing around the body of the professor, who is lying with his head in a pool of blood, a piece of chalk in his hand resting on the last stroke of the word written on the floor in his characteristic block capitals, "COIN," and near his pocket scattered on the concrete floor is his pocketknife and half a dozen coins, some clearly not U.S. in origin. You call in on your belt transceiver, and the campus cops ask you to do a quick inventory of the crime scene and to get people away to keep it from being disturbed. As part of this, without getting too close as to obliterate any faint footmarks, you go into obsessive-compulsive mode; you make a note regarding each coin, whether it is resting heads up or tails, what kind it is, and so on. Remember that you will carefully acknowledge any limitations in your
point of view--for instance if a couple of the coins are gold in color you will say that rather than that they are gold--or you may say they appear to be gold. (Though if they are Sacajawea dollars you will probably only note that fact and perhaps leave the color off.) If one is an old-style British twenty-pence piece you will remark that it is seven-sided, and if one is a penny that has been through the F.A.O. Schwartz souvenir milling machine in San Francisco so that it comes out oval with the name of the store and the city embossed into it you will say so, remarking that it is oval. Of a fire-blackened and warped coin whose value or nationality you cannot tell you may say only that, and that it is resting heads up, with a head in profile, indistinctly.

If the professor has told the class that his ex-wife works at a toy store in San Francisco, the oval coin, you think, may turn out to be a clue. But you will not say, kneeling off to the side a bit and carefully noting every trace of blood, every detail of the coins, his grip on the chalk, that the coins appear oval to you or that they look oval. You will not say it of the round coins or of the seven-sided 20P or of the oval coin, the penny from F.A.O. Schwartz.

Like the dog that doesn’t bark, this result, that you will not say of any of these coins that they look oval, even though one is oval--this result deserves a place in our inquiry.

One more example: Suppose the Denver mint, stamping out Sacajawea gold-colored dollars, has a malfunction for a few seconds and suppose that about three thousand of the coins get squeezed side to side in stacks while they are still hot enough to be malleable. The result is that they are slightly oval. Very slightly--holding one up and knowing there is a chance it might be oval, it is still difficult to tell, though if you put one into a stack of standard round Sacajawea dollars, you will be able to tell where the sides are indented
and where they bulge out, about, say, the thickness of a fingernail. A majority of the oval dollars, you find out, have by chance come to your town and most have made their way out the change machines at your local post office before the word gets out and collectors become interested. You regularly visit the post office to mail packages in the evening, and have been tossing the gold-colored dollars you get in change into a drawer for the last couple of months. You go check the drawer to find you have six (out of thirty) of the oval coins, worth about twenty dollars apiece now but perhaps more soon. Few locals seem to know, and you begin asking for them in change at the bank and local stores. You examine each one, but unless you have a round one or an oval one in your pocket you cannot be sure what you have. "This one looks oval," you say. By saying so you are saying there is a chance but you are not sure. After you check, whether it is oval or not, you will not say it looks oval but that it is oval or that it is not.

We have a case, the art class, in which coins look oval, a case, the murder scene, in which coins do not look oval, and a case, the mint malfunction case, in which coins sometimes look oval but don’t after we check even if they are oval.

We can abbreviate other examples. Perhaps one sign of a certain kind of astigmatism will be that circles, including coins, look oval to you on a ten-o'clock-to-four-o'clock longer axis. Some ancient coins were produced in rolling mills rather than produced with die stamps, and so you might as a tourist in Ionia be advised not to automatically pass by the oval ones (not, "Don't automatically pass by the ones that look oval," with its puzzling implication that you have astigmatism or haven't learned your kindergarten shapes). These add to our store of examples in which coins look oval, and in each case there are particular details of the case which make sense of saying they look oval. Conspicuously, those details have to do with particular cases and not with all cases.
Do coins look oval in general, separate from these kinds of details, perhaps when looked at from an angle? No they do not. Russell is wrong.

At this point some persons in my audience may wish to defend the view that the coins nevertheless do look oval to me in all the cases in which I see them other than straight on, whether I would say so or not. When asked for argument to support this view, especially in the face of the issue raised by the possibility that they are seeing the result of having dualism taped to the fronts of their flashlights--that is, that they are projecting their dualism and their causal theory of perception into the case, the arguments tend to be of the form spelled out by John Searle under the heading of the "assertion fallacy" in his book *Speech Acts* or a closely related form spelled out by Paul Grice in his 1961 essay "The Causal Theory of Perception" and then later under the rubric of "logical implicature" in essays such as his 1989 "Logic and Conversation." These arguments both roughly support the claim that the pronouncements at issue (several examples from ordinary language philosophers are given) need not be said because they are implied by what has been said, and that it is one of the burdens (and turfs) of philosophers that they have the duty to say things about examples which would not be said by those in the examples. Searle, perhaps because his essay has been shown to be profoundly question-begging or perhaps only out of uneasiness, appears to have backed off his position regarding the assertion fallacy, and Grice's argument fares no better when subjected to critical assessment. (See Frank Ebersole's (2001) "Does It Look the Color It Is?" and “The Causal Theory of Perception” in *Things We Know*, Fred Mosedale's (1978) "On Saying What is Obvious" and my “Telling the Truth vs. Being Frank.” Mosedale points to when we would say that something is implied in the example as a way to distinguish intelligible cases of implying from the cases Searle and Grice deploy. The Sacajawea dollars which
are all gold color and are well known as being gold color and so that you could leave off in your report that they are gold color might be a relevant case for assessing these claims about implying.) The oddity (Searle calls it fishiness) of saying the coin looks oval is not a proof but it is not nothing either. Once the question has been raised whether perceptions exist in exactly those cases in which we ordinarily do not remark on them, it begins to look more likely that their existence is something we conjured up or took for granted without thinking it through, based on our having bought into a Cartesian sketch of human beings, including a sketch of human perception. At the very least, the arguments for such a claim (that coins look oval when we see them other than straight on) need to be articulated and examined. Arguments based on accepting a dualistic psychology of perception will not work here because they are circular. Arguments based on Gricean or Searlean accounts of implication and obviousness are question-begging. Others are hard to find.

Another objection to the view that there are no such things as the coin looking oval in most of our seeing coins might go as follows: it is hopeless to use ordinary language as a guide to whether the coin looks oval, because ordinary language is notoriously sloppy and imprecise, and people will say anything. The proper response to this is to ask for support. It is, in fact, false that ordinary language is sloppy and imprecise. If we stick to one particular issue at a time, it is easy to check. And, since we already have a particular issue at hand, try it out. Construct examples, with enough detail that one can tell what sounds nonsensical, in which someone says within the example that a coin looks or coins look oval. O. K. Bouwsma (1965) addresses this alleged sloppiness in his essay, "The terms of ordinary language are . . . ."

The result of such checking is a weaker biographical argument against the view
that coins look oval in all cases of seeing coins obliquely, which rests on those who have
looked at the cases and examined their own temptations, resulting in the realization that
their impulse to defend the claim that the coins nevertheless do look oval rests on a
conviction that the causal theory of perception and thus the ubiquity of appearances must
be right. For them, taking the issue seriously leads to a feeling of confusion and a
realization that they may have to take back an unquestioned philosophical view because
their support is circular.

Please note that this is not an argument for the claim that the coins do not look
oval. It is just as unintelligible to claim the coins do not look oval as it is to claim that
they do. Unintelligibility, though, has become a fighting term among philosophers to such
an extent that the discussants sometimes stop listening to each other. Here, I've spelled
out any claims about unintelligibility in terms which refer to existence instead. That is
sloppy and perhaps not adequately excused by a desire to be consistent with Hume and
avoid treading on inflamed toes. My claim that perceptions as philosophers conceive of
them do not exist might be better put in a more careful way. The intelligibility of standard
philosophical claims about perceptions rest on an elaborately circular argument, in which
arguments for the urgency of the problem of knowledge and the problem of appearances
and reality rest on accepting the view for which those arguments are allegedly support.
Let’s say that over again: the legitimacy of the problem of appearances and reality
depends on our accepting the terms of the problem without argument—which involves
taking the conclusion as our support. My objection is that they, perceptions, have to be
thought of in such a way that they will exist, not only in those examples in which people
would remark on how things look, seem, appear, are perceived, but in precisely those
examples wherein we would say no such thing. Because the problems of appearance and
reality, problems of knowledge and problems of how to appraise the dreaming argument and argument from illusion require the existence of perceptions in all cases in which anyone e.g. sees anything, it is crucially important that our arguments for such existence be careful and non-circular.

Some more comments toward clarifying the position in this paper.

How does one get from what is said in particular examples to claims about the usually more abstract issues regarding the philosophical problem? The answer is that the problem gives us our temptations and makes relevant the kinds of examples against which that problem may be checked. The conversations in the examples are not directed toward the philosophical problem, of course, and so there may seem to be a kind of built-in prejudice against the problems. But our interest is given by the fact that we are philosophers, in the business of trying to clarify a problem and investigating the first moves toward supposing the problem is justified and supposing the problem rests on clear and unambiguous lines of thought. It is possible for problems to be bogus or to rest on mistakes, and so a basic excavation of the thinking on which the problem rests will be a good idea if we have any suspicion that the problem rests on any confusions or begged questions. Examples not guided by our philosophical thinking may call into question the way we got the question going. That’s not a proof the question is a bad question, but articulating how the question can be made sense of without importing other philosophically questionable thinking becomes an urgent need. If the only way to make the problems of appearance and reality into problems involves taking some few examples (the word contexts, usually a mistake, might do here–see below) to be the same as all examples—or if it requires importing a view of human beings which is shaped by Cartesian dualism, then that will necessarily change the issue into one of how to take
A note on context. It might be supposed that this paper is shaped by contextualist theories of meaning. There may be some small part of this idea which is correct, but it is seriously misleading, which is to say, wrong. For one thing, the philosophical notion of context (which may show up in pragmatics in linguistics) is very much at odds with those examples in which we would remark about things said in context or out of context. For another, what counts as a context is a matter of context, and so general, abstract claims about meaning depending on context are problematic as they come out the gate. Most of the therapeutic value of talk about context is better put in other ways, partly because the whole notion of meaning depending on context imports serious mistakes about how language works, in particular the division between utterances or other signs and what is supposedly conveyed by their means. Those who say things about something meaning something different or being different in different contexts suffer a genetic predisposition to think they know what the thing is that crosses contexts. Look at the example of teaching children how to draw, in which it makes sense to speak of (that is, within the example we would say such a thing) coins looking oval. From outside the example, we will be strongly tempted to say things like, “The meaning of ‘the coins look oval’ depends on the context of teaching the kids about drawing.” But it will be a difficult matter indeed to ascertain the identity of the thing we think can be carried from one context to another, without imposing that identity onto the examples in a way which would never be remarked in the examples. Try having the teacher suffer from the kind of astigmatism which has the effect of making circles elongated on a ten-o’clock-to-four-o’clock axis, and set up an example in which one might say the thing in quotes is the same in that
context as in the other of teaching. What we will find is that all the fierce temptations regarding identity, types and tokens and substance and accidents, ride into the examples upon the backs of the philosophers rather than emerging in the examples. To speak of examples as contexts is to invite the idea that there is a thing which remains the same across contexts. Perhaps saying that what makes sense of a great deal that we say is given us by the details of the examples in which we say it--perhaps that too invites us to think that the “it” is a migratory animal which somehow maintains an identity. Against that is the reminder that it is our temptations which provide that identity--we were investigating whether there is such a thing as coins looking oval when we see them other than straight on, and found that often there is not and that where there is we find no encouragement to think the cases all the same.

One might prophesy where this investigation could end up, given perseverance and luck. We seem pointed toward something like the following: Internal mental states are only sometime things, making the sense they do by occurring in examples which provide in their details the ways to make sense of them and the sense of what we would say about them. Some of the cognitive states to which human beings allegedly have constant access might be only occasional--memory, for instance, has nothing to do with my ability to finish a sentence in a way consistent with its beginning, nothing to do with my continuing ability to walk to my classes, nothing to do with my ability to speak and listen, except in the particular cases (such as incipient Alzheimers) in which we would claim to remember, or deny remembering, or ask about memory. Consciousness, which many philosophers think of as ubiquitous among non-sleeping (well, among sleeping but dreaming too) human beings, will prove to be a much less generally prevalent condition when tied to
examples in which awareness or consciousness would make sense as part of what we would say, and many of our philosophical pronouncements about consciousness start to look like pronouncements about cat behavior based on watching cats on leashes. Studies of our psychology are likely to be more careful and yield much less arrogant pronouncements regarding how the mind works, and mind itself will turn out to be a smaller deal than the mythological beast toward which the Chomskys and Pinkers and Chalmerses have been sending their graduate student beaters.

Notes

1. We could find formulations of the argument from illusion by heaving rocks in philosophers’ offices and then picking up whatever’s under them. Descartes’ First Meditation will do very well, and the dreaming argument is a powerful opening wedge for the more general argument discussed here. A.J. Ayer (1940) provided a much-discussed version in his *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, (and in 1956 in *The Problem of Knowledge*), and J.L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensabilia* is a relentless ripping of Ayer limb from limb from which most readers seem to have decorously averted their eyes so as to keep Ayer in our memories as we always knew him. Ted Honderich’s 1991 “Seeing Qualia and Positing the World” makes clear that the debates about qualia are new wine in old bottles, and that the argument from illusion is the key to disguised new versions of debates about subjective or private objects involved in perception. Current talk about the closure principle might seem promising, but when applied to skepticism
always begins after the first premise of the argument from illusion is stated as obvious: here we are with these experiences, and which hypothesis shall we accept as better explanation, an evil genius or brain in a vat story, or that there is a world? Recent discussions of Hegel’s sense certainty, such as Nathan Andersen’s 2010 “The Certainty of Sense-Certainty” separates, among other things, sense certainty from truth, and helps show that once separated those issues are forms of these issues.

2. While this paper is mainly a record of my own thinking, battles against the existence of percepts or sense-data or perceptions or qualia are not at all new. Sellars has famously written about the “myth of the given.” J.L. Austin’s seems to me the strongest position. Honderich’s essay has a helpful summary outline of the issue. Wittgenstein’s 1969 On Certainty, which I regard as a first unfinished draft record of W’s working toward a goal he could not himself see clearly, shows a struggle to apply the methods which would, I think, lead to the results I give. Frank Ebersole takes up issues about perceptions in several essays—“Feeling Eggs and Pains,” “The Objects of Perceptions and Dreams,” “And Then I See,” and “Does It Look the Color It Is?” I’m not sure, when I remind myself of these other thinkers, that I am saying anything new except that it’s still an issue and that philosophers who think there is an issue about whether perceptions have content or are only relational have not listened.
References


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