

## J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*

### III

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 statement it runs as follows.<sup>1</sup> 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 (“a 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.)

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", conjurers—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.<sup>3</sup> But I think we might also say that the patient who sees pink rats has (suffers from) delusions—particularly, no doubt, if, as would probably be the case, he is not clearly aware that his pink rats aren't real rats.<sup>4</sup>

The most important differences here are that the term "an illusion" (in a 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* 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* 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 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.

Why is it that we tend—if we do—to confuse illusions with delusions? Well,

partly, no doubt the terms are often used loosely. But there is also the point that people may have, without making this explicit, different views or theories about the facts of some cases. Take the case of seeing a ghost, for example. It is not generally known, or agreed, what seeing ghosts *is*. Some people think of seeing ghosts as a case of something being conjured up, perhaps by the disordered nervous system of the victim; so in their view seeing ghosts is a case of delusion. But other people have the idea that what is called seeing ghosts is a case of being taken in by shadows, perhaps, or reflections, or a trick of the light—that is, they assimilate the case in their minds to illusion. In this way, seeing ghosts, for example, may come to be labelled sometimes as “delusion”, sometimes as “illusion”; and it may not be noticed that it makes a difference which label we use. Rather, similarly, there seem to be different doctrines in the field as to what mirages are. Some seem to take a mirage to be a vision conjured up by the crazed brain of the thirsty and exhausted traveller (delusion), while in other accounts it is a case of atmospheric refraction, whereby something below the horizon is made to appear above it (illusion). (Ayer, you may remember, takes the delusion view, although he cites it along with the rest as a case of illusion. He says not that the oasis appears to be where it is not, but roundly that “it does not exist”.)

The way in which the “argument from illusion” positively trades on not distinguishing illusions from delusions is, I think, this. So long as it is being suggested that the cases paraded for our attention are cases of *illusion*, there is the implication (from the ordinary use of the word) that there really is something there that we perceive. But then, when these cases begin to be quietly called delusive, there comes in the very different suggestion of something being conjured up, something unreal or at any rate “immaterial”. These two implications taken together may then subtly insinuate that in the cases cited there really is something that we are perceiving, but that this is an immaterial something; and this insinuation, even if not conclusive by itself, is certainly well calculated to edge us a little closer towards just the position where the sense-datum theorist wants to have us.

So much, then—though certainly there could be a good deal more—about the differences between illusions and delusions and the reasons for not obscuring them. Now let us look briefly at some of the other cases Ayer lists. Reflections, for instance. No doubt you *can* produce illusions with mirrors, suitably disposed. But is just *any* case of seeing something in a mirror an illusion, as he implies? Quite obviously not. For seeing things in mirrors is a perfectly *normal* occurrence, completely familiar, and there is usually no question of anyone being taken in. No doubt, if you’re an infant or an aborigine and have never come across a mirror before, you may be pretty baffled, and even visibly perturbed, when you do. But is that a reason why the rest of us should speak of illusion here? And just the same goes for the phenomena of perspective—again, one *can* play tricks with perspective, but in the ordinary case there is no question of illusion. That a round coin should “look elliptical” (in one sense) from some points of view is exactly what we expect and what we normally find; indeed, we should be badly put out if we ever found this not to be so. Refraction again—the stick that looks bent in water—is far too familiar a case to be properly called a case of illusion. We may perhaps be prepared to agree that the stick looks bent; but then we can see that it’s partly submerged in water, so that is exactly how we should expect it to look.

It is important to realize here how familiarity, so to speak, takes the edge of illusion. Is the cinema a case of illusion? Well, just possibly the first man who ever saw moving pictures may have felt inclined to say that here was a case of illusion. But in fact it's pretty unlikely that even he, even momentarily, was actually taken in; and by now the whole thing is so ordinary a part of our lives that it never occurs to us even to raise the question. One might as well ask whether producing a photograph is producing an illusion—which would plainly be just silly.

Then we must not overlook, in all this talk about illusions and delusions, that there are plenty of more or less unusual cases, not yet mentioned, which certainly aren't either. Suppose that a proof-reader makes a mistake—he fails to notice that what ought to be “causal” is printed as “casual”; does he have a delusion? Or is there an illusion before him? Neither, of course; he simply *misreads*. Seeing after-images, too, though not a particularly frequent occurrence and not just an ordinary case of seeing, is neither seeing illusions nor having delusions. And what about dreams? Does the dreamer see illusions? Does he have delusions? Neither; dreams are *dreams*. . . .

Next, let us have a look at the account Ayer himself gives of some at least of the cases he cites. (In fairness we must remember here that Ayer has a number of quite substantial reservations of his own about the merits and efficacy of the argument from illusion, so that it is not easy to tell just how seriously he intends his exposition of it to be taken; but this is a point we shall come back to.)

First, then, the familiar case of the stick in water. Of this case Ayer says (*a*) that since the stick looks bent but is straight, “at least one of the visual appearances of the stick is *delusive*”; and (*b*) that “what we see [directly anyway] is not the real quality of [a few lines later, not part of] a material thing”. Well now: does the stick “look bent” to begin with? I think we can agree that it does, we have no better way of describing it. But of course it does *not* look *exactly* like a bent stick, a bent stick out of water—at most, it may be said to look rather like a bent stick partly immersed *in* water. After all, we can't help seeing the water the stick is partly immersed in. So exactly what in this case is supposed to be *delusive*? What is wrong, what is even faintly surprising, in the idea of a stick's being straight but looking bent sometimes? Does anyone suppose that if something is straight, then it jolly well has to *look* straight at all times and in all circumstances? Obviously no one seriously supposes this. So what mess are we supposed to get into here, what is the difficulty? For of course it has to be suggested that there *is* a difficulty—a difficulty, furthermore, which calls for a pretty radical solution, the introduction of sense-data. But what is the problem we are invited to solve in this way?

Well, we are told, in this case you are seeing *something*; and what is this something “if it is not part of any material thing”? But this question is, really, completely mad. The straight part of the stick, the bit not under water, is presumably part of a material thing; don't we see that? And what about the bit *under* water?—we can see that too. We can see, come to that, the water itself. In fact what we see is *a stick partly immersed in water*; and it is particularly extraordinary that this should appear to be called in question—that a question should be raised about *what* we are seeing—since this, after all, is simply the description of the situation with which we started. It was, that is to say, agreed at the start that

we were looking at a stick, a “material thing”, part of which was under water. If, to take a rather different case, a church were cunningly camouflaged so that it looked like a barn, how could any serious question be raised about what we see when we look at it? We see, of course, *a church* that now *looks like a barn*. We do *not* see an immaterial barn, an immaterial church, or an immaterial anything else. And what in this case could seriously tempt us to say that we do?

Notice, incidentally, that in Ayer’s description of the stick-in-water case, which is supposed to be prior to the drawing of any philosophical conclusions, there has already crept in the unheralded but important expression “visual appearances”—it is, of course, ultimately to be suggested that all we *ever* get when we see is a visual appearance (whatever that may be).

Consider next the case of my reflection in a mirror. My body, Ayer says, “appears to be some distance behind the glass”; but as it’s in front, it can’t really be behind the glass. So what am I seeing? A sense-datum. What about this? Well, once again, although there is no objection to saying that my body “appears to be some distance behind the glass”, in saying this we must remember what sort of situation we are dealing with. It does not “appear to be” there in a way which might tempt me (though it might tempt a baby or a savage) to go round the back and look for it, and be astonished when this enterprise proved a failure. (To say that A is *in* B doesn’t always mean that if you open B you will find A, just as to say that A is *on* B doesn’t always mean that you could pick it off—consider “I saw my face in the mirror”, “There’s a pain in my toe”, “I heard him on the radio”, “I saw the image on the screen”, &c. Seeing something in a mirror is not like seeing a bun in a shop-window.) But does it follow that, since my body is not actually located behind the mirror, I am not seeing a material thing? Plainly not. For one thing, I can see the mirror (nearly always anyway). I can see my own body “indirectly”, *sc.* in the mirror. I can also see the reflection of my own body or, as some would say, a mirror-image. And a mirror-image (if we choose this answer) is not a “sense-datum”; it can be photographed, seen by any number of people, and so on. (Of course there is no question here of either illusion or delusion.) And if the question is pressed, what actually *is* some distance, five feet say, behind the mirror, the answer is, not a sense-datum, but some region of the adjoining room.

The mirage case—at least if we take the view, as Ayer does, that the oasis the traveller thinks he can see “does not exist”—is significantly more amenable to the treatment it is given. For here we are supposing the man to be genuinely deluded, he is *not* “seeing a material thing”.<sup>5</sup> We don’t actually have to say, however, even here that he is “experiencing sense-data”; for though, as Ayer says above, “it is convenient to give a name” to what he is experiencing, the fact is that it already has a name—a *mirage*. Again, we should be wise not to accept too readily the statement that what he is experiencing is “*similar in character* to what he would be experiencing if he were seeing a real oasis”. For is it at all likely, really, to be very similar? And, looking ahead, if we were to concede this point we should find the concession being used against us at a later stage—namely, at the stage where we shall be invited to agree that we see sense-data always, in normal cases too.

I want now to take up again the philosophical argument as it is set out in the texts we are discussing. As I mentioned earlier, the argument from illusion is intended primarily to persuade us that, in certain exceptional, abnormal situations, what we perceive—directly anyway—is a sense-datum; but then there comes a second stage, in which we are to be brought to agree that what we (directly) perceive is *always* a sense-datum, even in the normal, unexceptional case. It is this second stage of the argument that we must now examine.

Ayer expounds the argument thus. There is, he says, “no intrinsic difference in kind between those of our perceptions that are veridical in their presentation of material things and those that are delusive. When I look at a straight stick, which is refracted in water and so appears crooked, my experience is qualitatively the same as if I were looking at a stick that really was crooked. . . .” If, however, “when our perceptions were delusive, we were always perceiving something of a different kind from what we perceived when they were veridical, we should expect our experience to be qualitatively different in the two cases. We should expect to be able to tell from the intrinsic character of a perception whether it was a perception of a sense-datum or of a material thing. But this is not possible. . . .” Price’s exposition of this point,<sup>6</sup> to which Ayer refers us, is in fact not perfectly analogous; for Price has already somehow reached the conclusion that we are always aware of sense-data, and here is trying to establish only that we cannot distinguish *normal* sense-data, as “parts of the surfaces of material things”, from *abnormal* ones, not “parts of the surfaces of material things”. However, the argument used is much the same: “the abnormal crooked sense-datum of a straight stick standing in water is qualitatively indistinguishable from a normal sense-datum of a crooked stick”; but “is it not incredible that two entities so similar in all these qualities should really be so utterly different: that the one should be a real constituent of a material object, wholly independent of the observer’s mind and organism, while the other is merely the fleeting product of his cerebral processes?”

It is argued further, both by Ayer and Price, that “even in the case of veridical perceptions we are not directly aware of material things” [or *apud* Price, that our sense-data are not parts of the surfaces of material things] for the reason that “veridical and delusive perceptions may form a continuous series. Thus, if I gradually approach an object from a distance I may begin by having a series of perceptions which are delusive in the sense that the object appears to be smaller than it really is. Let us assume that this series terminates in a veridical perception.<sup>7</sup> Then the difference in quality between this perception and its immediate predecessor will be of the same order as the difference between any two delusive perceptions that are next to one another in the series. . . .” But “these are differences of degree and not of kind. But this, it is argued, is not what we should expect if the veridical perception were a perception of an object of a different sort, a material thing as opposed to a sense-datum. Does not the fact that veridical and delusive perceptions shade into one another in the way that is indicated by these examples show that the objects that are perceived in either case are generically the same? And from this it would follow, if it was acknowledged that the delusive perceptions were perceptions of sense-data, that what we directly experienced was always a sense-datum and never a material thing.” As Price puts

it, “it seems most extraordinary that there should be a total difference of nature where there is only an infinitesimal difference of quality”.<sup>8</sup>

Well, what are we to make of the arguments thus set before us?

1. It is pretty obvious, for a start, that the terms in which the argument is stated by Ayer are grossly tendentious. Price, you remember, is not producing the argument as a proof that we are always aware of sense-data; in his view that question has already been settled, and he conceives himself to be faced here only with the question whether any sense-data are “parts of the surfaces of material objects”. But in Ayer’s exposition the argument *is* put forward as a ground for the conclusion that what we are (directly) aware of in perception is always a sense-datum; and if so, it seems a rather serious defect that this conclusion is practically assumed from the very first sentence of the statement of the argument itself. In that sentence Ayer uses, not indeed for the first time, the term “perceptions” (which incidentally has never been defined or explained), and takes it for granted, here and throughout, that there is at any rate some kind of entities of which we are aware in absolutely all cases—namely, “perceptions”, delusive or veridical. But of course, if one has already been induced to swallow the idea that every case, whether “delusive” or “veridical”, supplies us with “perceptions”, one is only too easily going to be made to feel that it would be straining at a gnat not to swallow sense-data in an equally comprehensive style. But in fact one has not even been told what “perceptions” *are*; and the assumption of their ubiquity has been slipped in without any explanation or argument whatever. But if those to whom the argument is ostensibly addressed were not thus made to concede the essential point from the beginning, would the statement of the argument be quite such plain sailing?

2. Of course we shall also want to enter a protest against the argument’s bland assumption of a simple dichotomy between “veridical and delusive experiences”. There is, as we have already seen, *no* justification at all *either* for lumping all so-called “delusive” experiences together, *or* for lumping together all so-called “veridical” experiences. But again, could the argument run quite so smoothly without this assumption? It would certainly—and this, incidentally, would be all to the good—take rather longer to state.

3. But now let us look at what the argument actually says. It begins, you will remember, with an alleged statement of fact—namely, that “there is no intrinsic difference in kind between those of our perceptions that are veridical in their presentation of material things and those that are delusive” (Ayer), that “there is no qualitative difference between normal sense-data as such and abnormal sense-data as such” (Price). Now, waiving so far as possible the numerous obscurities in and objections to this manner of speaking, let us ask whether what is being alleged here is actually true. Is it the case that “delusive and veridical experiences” are not “qualitatively different”? Well, at least it seems perfectly extraordinary to say so in this sweeping way. Consider a few examples. I may have the experience (dubbed “delusive” presumably) of dreaming that I am being presented to the Pope. Could it be seriously suggested that having this dream is “qualitatively indistinguishable” from *actually being* presented to the Pope? Quite obviously not. After all, we have the phrase “a dream-like quality”; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality, and some artists and writers occasionally try to impart it, usually with scant success, to their works. But of course, if the

fact here alleged *were* a fact, the phrase would be perfectly meaningless, because applicable to everything. If dreams were not “qualitatively” different from waking experiences, then *every* waking experience would be like a dream; the dream-like quality would be, not difficult to capture, but impossible to avoid.<sup>9</sup> It is true, to repeat, that dreams are *narrated* in the same terms as waking experiences: these terms, after all, are the best terms we have; but it would be wildly wrong to conclude from this that what is narrated in the two cases is *exactly alike*. When we are hit on the head we sometimes say that we “see stars”; but for all that, seeing stars when you are hit on the head is *not* “qualitatively” indistinguishable from seeing stars when you look at the sky.

Again, it is simply not true to say that seeing a bright green after-image against a white wall is exactly like seeing a bright green patch actually on the wall; or that seeing a white wall through blue spectacles is exactly like seeing a blue wall; or that seeing pink rats in D.T.s is exactly like really seeing pink rats; or (once again) that seeing a stick refracted in water is exactly like seeing a bent stick. In all these cases we may *say* the same things (“It looks blue”, “It looks bent”, &c.), but this is no reason at all for denying the obvious fact that the “experiences” are *different*.

4. Next, one may well wish at least to ask for the credentials of a curious general principle on which both Ayer and Price seem to rely,<sup>10</sup> to the effect that, if two things are not “generally the same”, the same “in nature”, then they can’t be alike, or even very nearly alike. If it were true, Ayer says, that from time to time we perceived things of two different kinds, then “we should expect” them to be qualitatively different. But why on earth should we?—particularly if, as he suggests would be the case, we never actually found such a thing to be true. It is not at all easy to discuss this point sensibly, because of the initial absurdity in the hypothesis that we perceive just *two* kinds of things. But if, for example, I had never seen a mirror, but were told (*a*) that in mirrors one sees reflections of things, and (*b*) that reflections of things are not “generally the same” as things, is there any reason why I should forthwith *expect* there to be some whacking big “qualitative” difference between seeing things and seeing their reflections? Plainly not; if I were prudent, I should simply wait and see what seeing reflections was like. If I am told that a lemon is generally different from a piece of soap, do I “expect” that no piece of soap could look just like a lemon? Why should I?

(It is worth noting that Price helps the argument along at this point by a bold stroke of rhetoric: how *could* two entities be “qualitatively indistinguishable”, he asks, if one is a “real constituent of a material object”, the other “*a fleeting product of his cerebral processes*”? But how in fact are we supposed to have been persuaded that sense-data are *ever* fleeting products of cerebral processes? Does this colourful description fit, for instance, the reflection of my face in a mirror?)

5. Another erroneous principle which the argument here seems to rely on is this: that it *must* be the case that “delusive and veridical experiences” are not (as such) “qualitatively” or “intrinsicly” distinguishable—for if they were distinguishable, we should never be “deluded”. But of course this is not so. From the fact that I am sometimes “deluded”, mistaken, taken in through failing to distinguish A from B, it does not follow at all that A and B must be *indistinguishable*. Perhaps I should have noticed the difference if I had been more careful or attentive; perhaps I am just bad at distinguishing things of this sort (e.g. vintages); perhaps, again, I have never learned to discriminate between them, or haven’t



had much practice at it. As Ayer observes, probably truly, “a child who had not learned that refraction was a means of distortion would naturally believe that the stick really was crooked as he saw it”; but how is the fact that an uninstructed child probably would not discriminate between *being refracted* and *being crooked* supposed to establish the allegation that there *is* no “qualitative” difference between the two cases? What sort of reception would I be likely to get from a professional tea-taster, if I were to say to him, “But there can’t be any difference between the flavours of these two brands of tea, for I regularly fail to distinguish between them”? Again, when “the quickness of the hand deceives the eye”, it is not that what the hand is really doing is *exactly like* what we are tricked into thinking it is doing, but simply that it is *impossible to tell* what it is really doing. In this case it may be true that we can’t distinguish, and not merely that we don’t; but even this doesn’t mean that the two cases are exactly alike.

I do not, of course, wish to deny that there may be cases in which “delusive and veridical experiences” really are “qualitatively indistinguishable”; but I certainly do wish to deny (*a*) that such cases are anything like as *common* as both Ayer and Price seem to suppose, and (*b*) that there *have* to be such cases to accommodate the undoubted fact that we are sometimes “deceived by our senses”. We are not, after all, quasi-infallible beings, who can be taken in only where the avoidance of mistake is completely impossible. But if we are prepared to admit that there may be, even that there are, *some* cases in which “delusive and veridical perceptions” really are indistinguishable, does this admission require us to drag in, or even to let in, sense-data? No. For even if we were to make the prior admission (which we have so far found no reason to make) that in the “abnormal” cases we perceive sense-data, we should not be obliged to extend this admission to the “normal” cases too. For why on earth should it *not* be the case that, in some few instances, perceiving one sort of thing is exactly like perceiving another?

6. There is a further quite general difficulty in assessing the force of this argument, which we (in common with the authors of our texts) have slurred over so far. The question which Ayer invites us to consider is whether two classes of “perceptions”, the veridical and the delusive, are or are not “qualitatively different”, “intrinsically different in kind”; but how are we supposed to set about even considering this question, when we are not told what “a perception” *is*? In particular, how many of the circumstances of a situation, as these would ordinarily be stated, are supposed to be included in “the perception”? For example, to take the stick in water again: it is a feature of this case that part of the stick is under water, and water, of course, is not invisible; is the water, then, part of “the perception”? It is difficult to conceive of any grounds for denying that it is; but *if* it is, surely this is a perfectly obvious respect in which “the perception” differs from, is distinguishable from, the “perception” we have when we look at a bent stick *not* in water. There is a sense, perhaps, in which the presence or absence of water is not the *main thing* in this case—we are supposed to be addressing ourselves primarily to questions about the stick. But in fact, as a great quantity of psychological investigation has shown, discrimination between one thing and another very frequently depends on such more or less extraneous concomitants of the main thing, even when such concomitants are not consciously taken note of. As I said, we are told nothing of what “a perception” is; but could any defensible account, if such an account were offered, completely exclude all these highly

significant attendant circumstances? And if they *were* excluded—in some more or less arbitrary way—how much interest or importance would be left in the contention that “delusive” and “veridical” perceptions are indistinguishable? Inevitably, if you rule out the respects in which A and B differ, you may expect to be left with respects in which they are alike.

I conclude, then, that this part of the philosophical argument involves (though not in every case equally essentially) (a) acceptance of a quite bogus dichotomy of all “perceptions” into two groups, the “delusive” and the “veridical”—to say nothing of the unexplained introduction of “perceptions” themselves; (b) an implicit but grotesque exaggeration of the *frequency* of “delusive perceptions”; (c) a further grotesque exaggeration of the *similarity* between “delusive” perceptions and “veridical” ones; (d) the erroneous suggestion that there *must* be such similarity, or even qualitative *identity*; (e) the acceptance of the pretty gratuitous idea that things “generically different” could not be qualitatively alike; and (f)—which is really a corollary of (c) and (a)—the gratuitous neglect of those more or less subsidiary features which often make possible the discrimination of situations which, in other *broad* respects, may be roughly alike. These seem to be rather serious deficiencies.

### Notes

- 1 A.J. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963).
- 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.
- 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.
- 4 Cp. the white rabbit in the play called *Harvey*.
- 5 Not even “indirectly”, no such thing is “presented”. Doesn’t this seem to make the case, though more amenable, a good deal less useful to the philosopher? It’s hard to see how normal cases could be said to be *very like* this.
- 6 *Perception* (London: Methuen & Co., 1950), p. 31.
- 7 But what, we may ask, does this assumption amount to? From what distance does an object, a cricket-ball say, “look the size that it really is”? Six feet? Twenty feet?
- 8 I omit from consideration a further argument cited by both Price and Ayer, which makes play with the “causal dependence” of our “perceptions” upon the conditions of observation and our own “physiological and psychological states”.
- 9 This is part, no doubt *only* part, of the absurdity in Descartes’ toying with the notion that the whole of our experience might be a dream.
- 10 Ayer in fact expresses qualms later: see p. 12.