

## David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses*

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986, 262 pp.

Reviewed by Stephen R. C. Hicks, Indiana University

Review published in *Auslegung* 15:2 (1989), pp. 193-196

*The Evidence of the Senses* offers a highly original exposition and defense of direct realism. This book should be required reading for any professional with an interest in human cognition, but especially so for philosophers and psychologists with interests in perception and the bases of knowledge. Because of its comprehensiveness in covering the vast literature of the epistemology of perception and because of the clarity of its prose, *The Evidence of the Senses* should also be attractive to instructors looking for a text for graduate or upper-level undergraduate courses.

The major theses of Part I of Kelley's book can be summarized as follows: *Perception is a direct, preconceptual, non-inferential mode of awareness of physical objects and their properties*. A chapter or two is devoted to detailed expositions and defenses of each of this statement's constituent theses.

Chapter 1 lays out the basic assumptions of Kelley's realism, his main arguments for the directness of perception, and his polemic against the basic assumptions and arguments of its rivals, representationalism and idealism. The chapter is more historical than the rest, discussing the major sources of the contemporary debate: Descartes' representationalism (10-16), Kant's idealism (16-27), and the traditional "mirror of nature"<sup>1</sup> realisms.

Chapter 1 is also the heart of the book, for it is here that Kelley sets the tone for what follows by laying out his guiding principles. Kelley presents his direct realism in the context of a dichotomy between two fundamental approaches to all issues of cognition: the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness. The primacy of existence consists of two related theses: (1) the real world, or "existence," exists independently of consciousness, and (2) consciousness is fundamentally dependent upon reality for its contents. The primacy of consciousness, in its purest form, denies each.

Representationalism, on this analysis, is a middle ground, affirming that existence exists independently of our conscious states, while denying that the content of consciousness is fundamentally dependent upon that real world. After establishing an historical framework, and in the context of his distinction between primacy of existence and primacy of consciousness approaches, Kelley attempts to establish the axiomatic status of realism (27-31), to show the self-refuting nature of idealism (31-36), and to uncover two major (though not often discussed) issues that lie at the center of the controversy: the problem of integrating the 1st- and 3rd-person perspectives on perception (35-37), and the view that if perception is to be direct then the means of perception must not affect the result in any way; perception must, according to this latter (and erroneous) view, be "diaphanous" (37-43).

Chapter 2 is concerned with the often-advanced claim that, since perceptual awareness is the result of the integration of vast amounts of sensory stimuli, perception is therefore inferential or computational. This conclusion is then often offered as supporting nativism (e.g., by von Helmholtz, Fodor), or at least the indirectness of perception. Here, drawing on the work of perceptual psychologist J. J. Gibson and discussing the famous von Senden cases, Kelley is concerned to refute inferentialism in favor of the view that the necessary integrations of sensory stimuli can and should be conceived of as the result of non-computational, non-inferential, *physiological* means. Kelley argues further that just as from the fact of sensory integration one cannot properly conclude that computation or inference is occurring, from the fact that sensory information is *processed* it does not follow that the resulting perceptual awareness is *cognitively indirect*.

Chapter 3 is largely concerned with giving a realist account of perceptual relativity and the standard distinction between appearance and reality that it gives rise to. Since the existence of relativity has often been seen necessitating the epistemological subjectivity of perception and thus as presenting a major obstacle to the directness of perception, Kelley here explores the reasons why this has been so, what perceptual relativity actually should commit us to, and what the connection is between the related concepts “appearance” and “reality.” Kelley argues that perception is inherently *relational*, involving both an independent object and a subject with a specific means of consciousness, and that accordingly it is incorrect to conclude from the facts of perceptual relativity that the result of the contact between subject and object—perceptual awareness—is “in” one of the relata as opposed to the other. As an extended example of how this works out, Kelley looks in detail at the nature of color perception (95-111) and then applies it to the traditional primary/secondary quality distinction. (111-120).

Chapter 4 is devoted to critiquing representationalism in its many and varied forms. Representationalism is here defined as any view that first makes a distinction between an internal, subjective content of awareness and an external object, and which then argues that the latter is not essential to the existence of the former. This implies that the internal content can be described without reference to any external object that may have caused it. Perception is thus seen, on the representationalist model, as of a kind with dreams and hallucinations, the only difference being that in the case of a perception, the internal content will have been caused by an external object. Kelley here notes an interesting connection between representationalism and adverbialism. Although adverbialism is offered as a direct realist account of perception, it shares with representationalism the view that, since any experiential state can occur in the absence of an external object, experience is essentially non-relational. And it is as non-relational theories of consciousness that Kelley critiques both (122-129). In the course of the chapter, and as a required element in a defense of direct realism, Kelley also offers an original (to my knowledge) analysis of that phenomenon which is a major weapon in the arsenal of any representationalist (or idealist, for that matter): hallucinations (133-138). Perceptual relativity is again discussed, this time in the context of the representationalist interpretations of it (129-131). Also discussed are representationalist arguments which turn on a certain view of the causal processes involved in perception: How can direct realism handle the notorious dead star/time lag and double image issues (131-133)? What does it have to say about the possibility of scientists stimulating the appropriate nerve endings to produce “apparent” perceptions (138-141)?

Chapter 5 summarizes and integrates the material in Part I, yielding a distinction between sensation, perception, and conception, and a formal definition of perception (143-164). Kelley then considers the relationship between conception and perception in greater detail,

with special attention given to views on the “theory-ladenness” of perception, to arguments for the view that concepts are a prerequisite for the existence of perceptual discrimination (165-169), and to the role of attention in perceptual discrimination and learning.

The two chapters that make up Part II range over some of the broader implications of Kelley's theory of perception for epistemology in general, from issues such as the role of perception in grounding our knowledge, the status of perceptual judgments and the need for a theory of concept-formation, to the implications of his direct realism for the foundationalism/coherentism issue, and to how his realism responds to the linguistic turn in philosophy this century (and especially to the linguistic versions of idealism which have gained wide currency—e.g., those of Quine, Sellars, and Rorty). Kelley holds that perception justifies our beliefs about physical objects, and does supply a valid basis for our knowledge. However, his views on how this is achieved do not place him very neatly into the foundationalist camp—at least not as this camp has been defined and defended through much of this century. Perceptual evidence is also held to be *non-propositional*; Kelley thus rejects the widely-held thesis that any justification of a belief or propositional state must be in terms of or on the basis of other beliefs or propositional states.

This book is worth a close reading. The argument is new, the historical and contemporary context of debate is presented elegantly and accurately, and Kelley's own stance with respect to the historical and contemporary debate emerges clearly.

## Notes

1. The phrase is Richard Rorty's, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979).