SIGHT AND TOUCH: AN ATTEMPT TO DISPROVE THE RECEIVED (OR BERKELEIAN) THEORY OF VISION

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649704576

Sight and Touch: An Attempt to Disprove the Received (or Berkeleian) Theory of Vision by Thomas K. Abbott

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

THOMAS K. ABBOTT

SIGHT AND TOUCH: AN ATTEMPT TO DISPROVE THE RECEIVED (OR BERKELEIAN) THEORY OF VISION

Trieste

SIGHT AND TOUCH:

AN

ATTEMPT TO DISPROVE

THE

RECEIVED (OR BERKELEIAN)

THEORY OF VISION.

BY

THOMAS K. ABBOTT, M.A.,

FELLOW AND TUTOR OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN.

ILLUSTRATED WITH WOODCUTS.

LONDON:

LONGMAN, GREEN, LONGMAN, ROBERTS, AND GREEN.

1864.

PREFACE.

The question discussed in the following pages is one of small compass, but no one versed in philosophy will estimate its importance by its extent. The theory assailed is in fact the stronghold of scepticism; for if consciousness is once proved to be delusive, there is an end to all appeals to its authority: doubt must reign supreme. It is to no purpose to say that it is not consciousness that is proved to be delusive, but an inveterate belief which is mistaken for a deliverance of consciousness; for it is practically the same thing whether consciousness itself deceives or something which is undistinguishable from it. It is of little use to prove that a certain witness is trustworthy, if in doing so we also prove that his evidence is falsified before it reaches us.

There is indeed only one dogmatic system consistent with the Berkeleian theory of Vision, and that is the Berkeleian Idealism. Yet dogmatists of all schools have accepted the theory. The only detailed attack upon it on philosophical grounds with which I am

acquainted is that of Mr. S. Bailey: "A Review of Berkeley's Theory of Vision, designed to show the unsoundness of that celebrated speculation" (London, 1842); and to this I owe some important suggestions. Sir David Brewster is known to be a decided opponent of the theory, but he has not attacked it on its philosophical side. I make no apology therefore for offering the following refutation, in which, as far as I was able, I have examined every aspect of the question.

Since these sheets were in press, the New Sydenham Society has issued the valuable work of Professor Donders, "On the Anomalies of Accommodation and Refraction of the Eye," which includes, in addition to his own important researches, all the essential information on the normal phenomena of adjustment and refraction, for which references had been given to foreign periodicals.

NOTE.—*References given at second-hand are enclosed in square brackets, and follow the name of the work from which they are taken.*

CONTENTS.

SIGHT AND TOUCH.

INTRODUCTION.

If we were challenged to point out a single discovery in mental science which is universally admitted, we should at once name the "Theory of Vision" of Bishop Berkeley. Its success has been, indeed, extraordinary. From the time of its first publication it has been accepted almost without question. Adam Smith indeed whispered a doubt, and Sir W. Hamilton, with singular tenderness and timidity, insinuates that although the theory seems to be satisfactorily demonstrated, it is yet in certain circumstances, "provokingly found totally at fault." But the only decided assailant of the theory in recent times was Mr. S. Bailey, and he was at once set aside as an impracticable sceptic; Mr. J. S. Mill, who entered the lists against him, deeming apparently that in such a contest it needed but the very slightest effort of his skill to overthrow his adversary. At the present moment every one who has tasted philosophy, even *summis labris*, is firmly convinced that he sees, not persons and things of various bulk, and at divers distances, but merely a variety of colour, or at the best, a flat picture of no perceptible magnitude, and at no perceptible distance. Yet the profoundest metaphysician, when he opens his bodily eyes, is mastered by the same belief as the unlearned: he cannot see what he knows he does see, and he cannot help

seeing what he knows it is impossible to see. Seeing is, for the time, believing; but on deliberate reflection, sense is fairly overpowered by reason. This is truly a brilliant victory of science. An universal persuasion that nothing really exists, would be scarcely more surprising. It is an ungrateful task to attempt to deprive psychology of its only acknowledged triumph, and to wrest from philosophers the cherished analogy which never failed to support them in bidding defiance to probability and common sense. The adventurous critic who does so must encounter, not only the prejudice in favour of an established doctrine, but the not less powerful prepossession of logical minds in favour of what appears to be close reasoning. Yet this theory, whether true or false, is, in truth, the shame, not the glory, of psychology; for it is a discovery in its domain made, not only without its help, but in spite of it, by physical reasoning. It has hitherto baffled psychology, either to verify it or to shake the physical basis on which it rests. But if the closest attention fails to discriminate ideas, not only successive, but of diverse senses—fails to distinguish perception from recollection—fails to discover ideas known to be constantly present—if psychology has been forced to make this ignominious confession at its first encounter with physics, it is time that it should abandon all pretence to be a science of observation, or, indeed, a science at all. The present state of the question is, moreover, a disgrace to philosophy. The theory, we are told, is at variance with common facts, and yet the proof appears to be "as satisfactory as anything in the whole compass of inductive reasoning."* By exposing its fallacy, we shall not only remove a reproach from philosophy, but shall sweep away with it not a few erroneous doctrines, of which it has been the chief or sole bulwark.

* Hamilton on Reid, p. 183.