Summary

Ch: 3 : On our knowledge of the external world

This chapter summarizes how philosophers think of the common problem portraited as the title of this chapter, that is the problem of our knowledge of the external world with their key point of view and different examples related to daily life of human.

At very first part of chapter, different philosophers stated that how they understand the reality of the world of sense with their point of stands.

As it is stated that it is nearly impossible to discuss the whole scope of this problem writer concentrate our attention on such matters as its objections to the continuity of motion and the infinity of space and time.

This problem can easily be understood by the given example that is: “the coloured surfaces which we see cease to exist when we shut our eyes. But it would be a mistake to infer that they are dependent upon mind, not real while we see them, or not the sole basis for our knowledge of the external world”.

The writer starts solving this problem by giving the description about the “data” to be involved in this analysis that is common knowledge.

common knowledge involved is of various kinds that is:

* There is first our acquaintance with particular objects of daily life—furniture, houses, towns, other people, and so on.
* Then there is the extension of such particular knowledge to particular things outside our personal experience history and geography, newspapers, etc.
* there is the systematization of all this knowledge of particulars by means of physical science, which derives immense persuasive force from its astonishing power of foretelling the future.

As said by the writer, it is impossible to go through all the data around the world and ourselves for the analysis. So, in order to sort them as per our need of problem some mechanism has to be undertaken. But as the normal common knowledge is to be broken out, we can say that filtration will only be based upon their relation to other details, not upon some external criterion which can be applied to all the details equally.

The first thing that appears when we begin to analyse our common knowledge is that some of it is derivative, while some is primitive. That means is some data can be seen as independent and some amount of data will the derived from other parts of whole common knowledge.

The example of this differentiation is: we unconsciously infer the “real” size and shape of a visible object from its apparent size and shape, according to its distance and our point of view. When we hear a person speaking from far away, we may miss one or parts of its speaking because of distance constraints so to complete that we supply that place by unconscious inference. So, by this we can discover what is really given in sense, is full of difficulty.

To minimise this, the next step in our analysis must be the consideration of how the derivative parts of our common knowledge arise.

A belief by which we completed our sense of knowledge in the above example is called derivative because as writer explains that: “a belief may be called derivative whenever it is caused by one or more other beliefs, or by some fact of sense which is not simply what the belief asserts”.

The idea of primitive and derivative belief is given by this example: “that tables and chairs, trees and mountains, are still there when we turn our backs upon them. because we have seen them, we have a right to suppose that they are there still, we feel that some kind of argument must be produced, and that if none is forthcoming, our belief can be no more than a pious opinion. We do not feel this as regards the immediate objects of sense”. This data has been produced by ourselves because of sensing these objects as it is in past, that’s why those objections are of primitive types.

This may categorize these data as two: Hard and soft data, writer means by “hard” data those which resist the solvent influence of critical reflection, and by “soft” data those which, under the operation of this process, become to our minds more or less doubtful. The hardest of hard data are of two sorts: the particular facts of sense, and the general truths of logic.

So as per the given facts and examples, writer confines data as the fact of sense and the laws of logic.

Now our problem is broken down to “Can the existence of anything other than our own hard data be inferred from the existence of those data?”

By the time writer infers about the “external”, he does not mean “spatially external,” unless “space” is interpreted. The immediate objects of sight, the coloured surfaces which make up the visible world, are spatially external in the natural meaning of this “External”.

This problem can also be interpreted like: “Can we know of the existence of any reality which is **independent of ourselves**?”, because as far as our main problem concerns about the external world. When we say that one thing is “independent” of another, we may mean either that it is logically possible for the one to exist without the other, or that there is no causal relation between the two such that the one only occurs as the effect of the other. The existence of a book, for example, is logically dependent upon that of its pages: without the pages there would be no book.

Now we have further reduced this problem into: “Can we know of the existence of any reality of which our Self is not part?”

whatever legitimate meaning we give to the Self, “our thoughts and feelings are causally dependent upon ourselves, they do not occur when there is no Self for them to belong to”. And we can say that independent objects are those which “we can know that objects of sense, or any other objects not our own thoughts and feelings, exist at times when we are not perceiving them”.

When writer speaks of a “sensible object,” it must be understood that he does not mean such a thing as a table, which is both visible and tangible, can be seen by many people at once, and is more or less permanent. What he means is just that patch of colour which is momentarily seen when we look at the table, or just that particular hardness which is felt when we press it, or just that particular sound which is heard when we rap it.

A table viewed from one place presents a different appearance from that which it presents from another place. This is the language of common sense, but this language already assumes that there is a real table of which we see the appearances. This is what we really know by experience, when we have freed our minds from the assumption of permanent “things” with changing appearances. What is really known is a correlation of muscular and other bodily sensations with changes in visual sensations. Thus the discovery is that the intervening medium affects the appearances of things cannot be made by means of the sense of sight alone.

To explain the idea of this intervening medium, writer gave a simple example of blue glasses. The frame of the glasses is of course visible, but the blue glass, if it is clean, is not visible. The blueness, which we say is in the glass, appears as being in the objects seen through the glass. The glass itself is known by means of the sense of touch. In order to know that it is between us and the objects seen through it, we must know how to correlate the space of touch with the space of sight. In order to know that the frame is the intermediatory and causing the blue sight we must sense it by touch once, and then every time we see the blue sight, we make the assumption that that the object of which we are conscious when we touch the blue glasses still exists after we have ceased to touch them. So long as we are touching them, nothing except our finger can be seen through the part touched, which is the only part where we immediately know that there is something.

This example leads us to believe that what is seen is usually tangible, and that it has, whether we touch it or not, the hardness or softness which we should expect to feel if we touched it. But the mere fact that we are able to infer what our tactile sensations would be shows that it is not logically necessary to assume tactile qualities before they are felt.

But in such a case as that of the blue spectacles, we find that whatever object is visible beyond the empty sight-place in the same line of sight has a different colour from what it has when there is no tangible object in the intervening touch-place; and as we move the tangible object in touch-space, the blue patch moves in sight-space.

The natural naïve belief is that things seen persist, when unseen, exactly or approximately as they appeared when seen; but this belief tends to be dispelled by the fact that what common sense regards as the appearance of one object changes with what common sense regards as changes in the point of view and in the intervening medium, including in the latter our own sense-organs and nerves and brain.

This fact, as just stated, assumes, however, the common-sense world of stable objects which it professes to call in question; hence, before we can discover its precise bearing on our problem, we must find a way of stating it which does not involve any of the assumptions which it is designed to render doubtful.

The assumption that sensible objects persist after they have ceased to be sensible—for example, that the hardness of a visible body, which has been discovered by touch, continues when the body is no longer touched—may be replaced by the statement that the effects of sensible objects persist, i.e. that what happens now can only be accounted for, in many cases, by taking account of what happened at an earlier time.

But before examining the question of our knowledge of other minds, let us return to the question of the thing-in-itself, namely, to the theory that what exists at times when we are not perceiving a given sensible object is something quite unlike that object, something which, together with us and our sense-organs, causes our sensations, but is never itself given in sensation.

The first thing to realize is that there are no such things as “illusions of sense.” Objects of sense, even when they occur in dreams, are the most indubitably real objects known to us. Objects of sense are called “real” when they have the kind of connection with other objects of sense which experience has led us to regard as normal; when they fail in this, they are called “illusions.” But what is illusory is only the inferences to which they give rise; in themselves, they are every bit as real as the objects of waking life.

Again, when the aspect of the table changes as we walk round it, and we are told there cannot be so many different aspects in the same place, the answer is simple: what does the critic of the table mean by “the same place”? The three-dimensional world seen by one mind therefore contains no place in common with that seen by another, for places can only be constituted by the things in or around them.

It is true that we cannot reasonably suppose just this world to have existed before, because it is conditioned by the sense-organs, nerves, and brain of the newly arrived man; but we can reasonably suppose that some aspect of the universe existed from that point of view, though no one was perceiving it.

The system consisting of all views of the universe, perceived and unperceived, I shall call the system of “perspectives”; I shall confine the expression “private worlds” to such views of the universe as are actually perceived. Thus a “private world” is a perceived “perspective” but there may be any number of unperceived perspectives.

In case the similarity is very great, we say the points of view of the two perspectives are near together in space; but this space in which they are near together is totally different from the spaces inside the two perspectives. By the similarity of neighbouring perspectives, many objects in the one can be correlated with objects in the other, namely with the similar objects. Given an object in one perspective, from the system of all the objects correlated with it in all the perspectives; that system may be identified with the momentary common-sense “thing.” Thus, an aspect of a “thing” is a member of the system of aspects which is the “thing” at that moment.

It will be observed that, while each perspective contains its own space, there is only one space in which the perspectives themselves are the elements. But there is only one perspective space, whose elements are single perspectives, each with its own private space. We have now to explain how the private space of a single perspective is correlated with part of the one all-embracing perspective space. Perspective space is the system of “points of view” of private spaces (perspectives), or, since “points of view” have not been defined, we may say it is the system of the private spaces themselves.

The perspectives in which the penny looks circular will be said to lie on a straight line in perspective space, and their order on this line will be that of the sizes of the circular aspects. It is to be remarked also that any other “thing” than our penny might have been chosen to define the relations of our perspectives in perspective space, and that experience shows that the same spatial order of perspectives would have resulted. In order to explain the correlation of private spaces with perspective space, we have first to explain what is meant by “the place (in perspective space) where a thing is.” For this purpose, let us again consider the penny which appears in many perspectives.

These two lines will meet in a certain place in perspective space, i.e. in a certain perspective, which may be defined as “the place (in perspective space) where the penny is.” It is true that, in order to prolong our lines until they reach this place, we shall have to make use of other things besides the penny, because, so far as experience goes, the penny ceases to present any appearance after we have come so near to it that it touches the eye.

We can, for example, remove our penny and prolong each of our two straight lines up to their intersection by placing other pennies further off in such a way that the aspects of the one are circular where those of our original penny were circular, and the aspects of the other are straight where those of our original penny were straight.

Having now defined the perspective, which is the place where a given thing is, we can understand what is meant by saying that the perspectives in which a thing looks large are nearer to the things than those in which it looks small: they are, in fact, nearer to the perspective which is the place where the thing is, If there is an aspect of a given thing in a certain private space, then we correlate the place where this aspect is in the private space with the place where the thing is in perspective space.

We may define “here” as the place, in perspective space, which is occupied by our private world. Thus, we can now understand what is meant by speaking of a thing as near to or far from “here.” A thing is near to “here” if the place where it is near to my private world. We can also understand what is meant by saying that our private world is inside our head; for our private world is a place in perspective space, and may be part of the place where our head is. It will be observed that two places in perspective space are associated with every aspect of a thing: namely, the place where the thing is, and the place which is the perspective of which the aspect in question form’s part.

Every aspect of a thing is a member of two different classes of aspects, namely: (1) the various aspects of the thing, of which at most one appears in any given perspective; (2) the perspective of which the given aspect is a member, i.e. that in which the thing has the given aspect.

The “place at which” is the place of the thing to which the aspect belongs; the “place from which” is the place of the perspective to which the aspect belongs. The aspects of a thing in different perspectives are to be conceived as spreading outwards from the place where the thing is, and undergoing various changes as they get further away from this place. The laws according to which they change cannot be stated if we only take account of the aspects that are near the thing, but require that we should also take account of the things that are at the places from which these aspects appear. It is, however, a psychologically derivative belief, since it results from observation of people’s bodies; and along with other such beliefs, it does not belong to the hardest of hard data, but becomes, under the influence of philosophic reflection, just sufficiently questionable to make us desire some argument connecting it with the facts of sense.

Our hypothetical construction meets these arguments, and shows that the account of the world given by common sense and physical science can be interpreted in a way which is logically unobjectionable, and finds a place for all the data, both hard and soft.

The First point that we can decode from the book "Our Knowledge of the External World" is : "can our senses' action help us to know about the things exist in external world, and if we can, how?". The writer spoke about the sensed-data in very detailed manner to resolve the above issue. He also concerned about how an object of external world appears when no one is perceiving it at a given moment. which leads us to agree on the continuous existence of object in the external world independently. Writer also discuss about the logical atomism which is the theory of small and finite particles that cannot be broken down into anything smaller. He shows how logical atomism applies to the question of knowledge and the physical world. He proposes that the “atoms” of our knowledge are the sense-data with which we are directly acquainted. At the later part of the reading, He reverted to the notion that physical objects could legitimately be inferred from sensory experience.