Saving the Appearances

A Study in Idolatry

by

OWEN BARFIELD

A Harbinger Book
Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
New York

I

THE RAINBOW

Look at a rainbow. While it lasts, it is, or appears to be, a great arc of many colours occupying a position out there in space. It touches the horizon between that chimney and that tree; a line drawn from the sun behind you and passing through your head would pierce the centre of the circle of which it is part. And now, before it fades, recollect all you have ever been told about the rainbow and its causes, and ask yourself the question *Is it really there?*

You know, from memory, that if there were a hillside three or four miles nearer than the present horizon, the rainbow would come to earth in front of and not behind it; that, if you walked to the place where the rainbow ends, or seems to end, it would certainly not be 'there'. In a word, reflection will assure you that the rainbow is the outcome of the sun, the raindrops and your own vision.

When I ask of an intangible appearance or representation, Is it really there? I usually mean, Is it there independently of my vision? Would it still be there, for instance, if I shut my eyes—if I moved towards or away from it. If this is what you also mean by 'really there', you will be tempted to add that the raindrops and the sun are really there, but the rainbow is not.

Does it follow that, as soon as anybody sees a rainbow, there 'is' one, or, in other words, that there is no difference between an hallucination or a madman's dream of a rainbow (perhaps on a clear day) and an actual rainbow? Certainly

not. You were not the only one to see that rainbow. You had a friend with you. (I forbear asking if you both saw 'the same' rainbow, because this is a book about history rather than metaphysics, and these introductory chapters are merely intended to clear away certain misconceptions.) Moreover, through the medium of language, you are well aware that thousands of others have seen rainbows in showery weather; but you have never heard of any sane person claiming to have seen one on a sunless or a cloudless day. Therefore, if a man tells you he sees a rainbow on a cloudless day, then, even if you are convinced that he means what he says, and is not simply lying, you will confidently affirm that the rainbow he sees is 'not there'.

In short, as far as being really there or not is concerned, the practical difference between a dream or hallucination of a rainbow and an actual rainbow is that, although each is a representation or appearance (that is, something which I perceive to be there), the second is a *shared* or collective representation.

Now look at a tree. It is very different from a rainbow. If you approach it, it will still be 'there'. Moreover, in this case, you can do more than look at it. You can hear the noise its leaves make in the wind. You can perhaps smell it. You can certainly touch it. Your senses combine to assure you that it is composed of what is called solid matter. Accord to the tree the same treatment that you accorded to the rainbow. Recollect all you have been told about matter and its ultimate structure and ask yourself if the tree is 'really there'. I am far from affirming dogmatically that the atoms, electrons, nuclei, etc., of which wood, and all matter, is said to be composed, are particular and identifiable objects like drops of rain. But if the 'particles' (as I will here call them for convenience) *are* there, and are all that is there, then, since the 'particles' are no more like the thing I call a tree than the raindrops are like the thing I call a rainbow, it follows, I think, that—just as a rainbow is the outcome of the raindrops and my vision—so, a tree is the outcome of

the particles and my vision and my other sense-perceptions. Whatever the particles themselves may be thought to be, the tree, as such, is a representation. And the difference, for me, between a tree and a complete hallucination of a tree is the same as the difference between a rainbow and an hallucination of a rainbow. In other words, a tree which is 'really there' is a collective representation. The fact that a dream tree differs in kind from a real tree, and that it is just silly to try and mix them up, is indeed rather literally a matter of 'common sense'.

This background of particles is of course presumed in the case of raindrops themselves, no less than in that of trees. The relation, *raindrops: rainbow*, is a picture or analogy, not an instance, of the relation, *particles: representation.*

Or again, if anyone likes to press the argument still further and maintain that what is true of the drops must also be true of the particles themselves, and that there is 'no such thing as an extra-mental reality', I shall not quarrel with him, but I shall leave him severely alone; because, as I say, this is not a book about metaphysics, and I have no desire to demonstrate that trees or rainbows—or particles—are not 'really there'—a proposition which perhaps has not much meaning. This book is not being written because the author desires to put forward a theory of perception, but because it seems to him that certain wide consequences flowing from the hastily expanded sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in particular their physics, have not been sufficiently considered in building up the general twentieth-century picture of the nature of the universe and of the history of the earth and man.

A better term than 'particles' would possibly be 'the unrepresented', since anything particular which amounts to a representation will always attract further physical analysis. Moreover, the atoms, protons and electrons of modern physics are now perhaps more generally regarded, not as particles, but as notional models or symbols of an unknown supersensible or subsensible base. All I seek to establish in

these opening paragraphs is, that, whatever may be thought about the 'unrepresented' background of our perceptions, the *familiar* world which we see and know around us—the blue sky with white clouds in it, the noise of a waterfall or a motor-bus, the shapes of flowers and their scent, the gesture and utterance of animals and the faces of our friends —the world too, which (apart from the special inquiry of physics) experts of all kinds methodically investigate—is a system of collective representations. The time comes when one must either accept this as the truth about the world or reject the theories of physics as an elaborate delusion. We cannot have it both ways.

II

COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS

A representation is something I perceive to be there. By premising that the everyday world is a system of collective representations, it may be thought that we blur the distinction between the fancied and the actual or, following the everyday use of language, between the apparently there and the really there. But this is not so. It only seems to be so because of the very great emphasis which—especially in the last three or four hundred years—the Western Mind has come to lay on the ingredient of spatial depth in the total complex of its perception. I shall return to this later.

As to what is meant by 'collective'—any discrepancy between my representations and those of my fellow men raises a presumption of unreality and calls for explanation. If, however, the explanation is satisfactory; if, for instance, it turns out that the discrepancy was due, not to my hallucination, but to their myopia or their dullness, it is likely to be accepted; and then my representation may itself end by becoming collective.

It is, however, not necessary to maintain that collectivity is the *only* test for distinguishing between a representation and a collective representation (though, to creatures for whom insanity is round the corner, it is often likely to be the crucial one).

I am hit violently on the head and, in the same moment, perceive a bright light to be there. Later on I reflect that the light was 'not really there'. Even if I had lived all my life on

a desert island where there was no-one to compare notes with, I might do as much. No doubt I should learn by experience to distinguish the first kind of light from the more practicable light of day or the thunderbolt, and should soon give up hitting myself on the head at sunset when I needed light to go on working by. In both cases I perceive light, but the various criteria of difference between them—duration, for instance, and a sharp physical pain, which the one involves and the other does not, are not difficult to apprehend.

What is required, is not to go on stressing the resemblance between collective representations and private representations, but to remember, when we leave the world of everyday for the discipline of any strict inquiry, that, *if* the particles, or the unrepresented, are in fact all that is *independently* there, then the world we all accept as real is in fact a system of collective representations.

Perception takes place by means of sense-organs, though the ingredient in it of sensation, experienced as such, varies greatly as between the different senses. In touch I suppose we come nearest to sensation without perception; in sight to perception without sensation. But the two most important things to remember about perception are these: *first*, that we must not confuse the percept with its cause. I do not hear undulating molecules of air; the name of what I hear is *sound*. I do not touch a moving system of waves or of atoms and electrons with relatively vast empty spaces between them; the name of what I touch is *matter*. *Second*, I do not perceive any *thing* with my sense-organs alone, but with a great part of my whole human being. Thus, I may say, loosely, that I 'hear a thrush singing'. But in strict truth all that I ever merely 'hear'—all that I ever hear simply by virtue of having ears—is *sound*. When I 'hear a thrush singing', I am hearing, not with my ears alone, but with all sorts of other things like mental habits, memory, imagination, feeling and (to the extent at least that the act of attention involves it) will. Of a man who merely heard in the first

sense, it could meaningfully be said that 'having ears' (i.e. not being deaf) 'he heard not'.

I do not think either of these two maxims depends on any particular theory of the nature of perception. They are true for any theory of perception I ever heard of—with the possible exception of Bishop Berkeley's.[1] They are true, whether we accept the Aristotelian and medieval conception of form and matter, or the Kantian doctrine of the forms of perception, or the theory of specific sense-energy, or the 'primary imagination' of Coleridge, or the phenomenology that underlies Existentialism, or some wholly unphilosophical system of physiology and psychology. On almost any received theory of perception the familiar world—that is, the world which is apprehended, not through instruments and inference, but simply—is for the most part dependent upon the percipient.

[1] Cf. p. 38.