Perception: From Descartes to Hume

According to the historico-analytic approach that we have adopted, will trace the theories of perception of G.E. Moore and A.J. Ayer from Descartes' philosophy. As Suman Gupta points out, during Descartes' lifetime: "the transition from feudalism to capitalism was taking place". She marks that while the feudal system was characterised by absolute hierarchy, rigid control of religion and a lower level of technology, the emerging capitalist system was based on scientific and technological development which necessitated the accommodation of the material aspectality in general scheme of things. Descartes, being the ideologue of the emerging bourgeoisie, did not accept materialism in its totality and denied the superiority of mind over matter in his dualism.

Descartes is a dualist. Dualism is the ontological position that there are two ultimate substances, viz., Mind and Matter. Descartes holds that mind and Matter are two independent and relative substances and there is an absolute substance, viz., God. Further Mind is superior to Matter as

Ibid., p. 23.
the absolute substance God is pure consciousness. Descartes accepts idealism. The essence of the spiritual substance, according to him, is thought and that of material substance is extension.

This superiority of Mind over Matter is further vindicated by Descartes through his method of doubt. Descartes claims that through this method he aims to arrive at certain, universal and necessary knowledge on the line of mathematics. And the ideal model was the Euclidean geometry. The certain and necessary truths have to be arrived at on the basis of a set of self-evident axioms. Thus Descartes adopts a method that is deductive and a-priori and advocates a rationalist epistemology. Rationalism is the epistemological doctrine that all our knowledge is based on reason or intuition. Descartes stresses that through sense-experience we can never reach universal and necessary knowledge for it remains deceptive. He bases the truth of factual propositions too ultimately on the firm groundings of reason. Descartes asserts that our senses might sometimes deceive us, and that even mathematical truths like ‘2 + 2 = 4’ might be doubted. However, he says, "...it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were
incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking."

Thus through his method of doubt Descartes establishes the self as a purely spiritual substance independent of and superior to body. As he says: "...while I could pretend that I had no body and there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist....From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist."4

In our study, we will try to show, first of all, that the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of both G.E.Moore and A.J.Ayer can be traced back to the empiricism of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, who took for granted some of the basic assumptions5 of Cartesian dualism.

We will try to show that Locke, an empiricist, tries to accommodate material substance in his system, but he takes the Cartesian dualism for granted. Since his system retains the dualistic tendency, the nature of material substance remains unknown and unknowable. This thread, we will try to show, is taken up by Moore who tries to accommodate material

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4 Ibid., p.127.
substance in a system which takes for granted the Cartesian assumption of primacy of mind over matter and their mutual independence; and therefore, he remains undecided about the correct analysis of matter. Ayer on the other hand, derives inspiration from Berkeley and Hume; the latter, in the words of Ayer is “the greatest of all British philosophers...”

**Rene Descartes (1596-1650)**

Rene Descartes defines knowledge or what he calls *scientia* as “systematic knowledge based on indubitable foundations.” The idea of indubitable or certain foundation is derived from mathematics and the perfect model for Descartes is Euclidean geometry. Thus the certain, universal and necessary knowledge have to be derived from a set of self-evident axioms. Only mathematics could be the basis of certain and necessary knowledge. Such knowledge has to be reached by the use of a *method*. That is, we need a method in order to reach the truth. This method for Descartes consists of reliable rules like reducing complex propositions ‘step by step to simpler ones’ and after that, beginning with the intuition of simplest propositions and ascending little by little to a knowledge of all.

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8 Ibid., p.6.
tools required here are intuition and deduction. Intuition, according to Descartes, is “the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason.”9 Since intuition is simpler it has more certainty than deduction. Deduction is “the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty.”10 It is not that Descartes does not mention experience at all, in fact it is one of the ways for “arriving at knowledge of things”.11 However he stresses that “our experiences of things are often deceptive”12. Therefore the obvious conclusion for him is that “while it is the intellect alone that is capable of knowledge, it can be helped or hindered by three other faculties, viz., imagination, sense-perception, and memory.”13

The guidelines that Descartes sets for himself in arriving at systematic and indubitable knowledge can be stated thus: (i) not to accept anything as true unless it is clearly and distinctly present to the mind; (ii) to analyse the problem into simpler parts; (iii) to start from simple and certain

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10 Ibid., p. 4.
11 Ibid., p. 2.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 9.
truths and proceed gradually to the more complicated ones; (iv) to review so meticulously as not to leave out any details.\(^\text{14}\)

Thus the method of philosophy has to be demonstrated, i.e. where we could derive conclusions from self-evident premises or from the clear and distinct ideas. Descartes defines clear and distinct ideas thus: “I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind.... I call a perception ‘distinct’ if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perception that it contains within itself only what is clear.”\(^\text{15}\) But how to get such clear and distinct ideas. For this Descartes uses the method of philosophical doubt. He asserts that through systematic doubt we could reach clear and distinct ideas. That is, by carefully rejecting everything which raises even a little doubt, we could reach a truth that was absolutely indubitable. Thus, for instance we reject the knowledge by senses because “our senses sometimes deceive us”\(^\text{16}\) and therefore cannot be relied upon. In this way, Descartes also becomes the precursor of the so-called ‘argument from illusion’ that remains, in one or the other way, one of the principal arguments against realism. A glimpse of this argument can be seen in Descartes’ philosophy. As he asserts: “...I had many experiences


\(^{16}\) Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *DSPW*, 1988, p.36.
which gradually undermined all the faith I had in the senses. Sometimes
towers which had looked round from a distance appeared square from close
up, and enormous statues standing on their pediments did not seem large
when observed from the ground. In these and countless other such cases, I
found that the judgements of the external senses were mistaken. ¹⁷ For
Descartes, even mathematical propositions like ‘2 + 2 = 4’ can be doubted
for it may be the case that no truth is intended for us. But the fact that I am
doubting cannot be doubted. Thus I doubt, or think, therefore I exist.
Descartes thus concludes: “I am thinking, therefore I exist—is the first and
most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly
way. ¹⁸ He recognises that there are “only two ultimate classes of things:
first, intellectual or thinking things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or
thinking substance; and secondly, material things, i.e. those which pertain
to extended substance or body. Perception, volition and all the modes both
of perceiving and of willing are referred to thinking substance; while to
extended substance (that is, extension in length, breadth, and depth), shape,
motion, position, divisibility of component parts and the like”. ¹⁹

¹⁷ Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy. DSPW. John Cottingham. Robert
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 176.
Here we may refer to Locke’s legacy of the concept of extended substance and the division of primary and secondary qualities from Descartes.

Descartes takes a dualist stand. Dualism is the ontological position that there are two ultimate substances, viz., Mind and Body. Descartes holds that mind and body are two independent and relative substances and there is a third, absolute substance viz., God. Also mind is superior to matter in the sense that “the knowledge of our mind is not simply prior to and more certain than the knowledge of our body, but also more evident...”\textsuperscript{20} We may refer here to empiricists’ inheritance of this Cartesian assumption that also stayed with Moore and Ayer. Another point is, the knowledge of self as a spiritual substance is the first self-evident truth to be attained through the method of doubt. According to Descartes, we have clear and distinct idea of both mind and body.\textsuperscript{21} He assigns two separate and distinct worlds to Mind and Body—the two independent substances. By substance, as we have already stated, Descartes means “a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence.”\textsuperscript{22}

The three major assumptions of Cartesian dualism, according to Suman Gupta, are:

\textsuperscript{20} Rene Descartes, \textit{The Principles of Philosophy}, in DSPW, 1988, p.163.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p.178.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.177.
1. “Mind and matter are two basic realities which can exist completely independently of one another.

2. And furthermore being separate they cannot have even causal interconnections. The second assumption, we find, does not follow from the first one, in the sense that, even though two realities may be independent of each other yet they may causally interact with each other. Descartes on the other hand, assumed that, logically, there cannot be any causal connection between two independent realities.

3. Descartes also assumes that though Mind and Matter are two independent substances yet Mind is logically prior to Matter.”

On the basis of the three above-stated assumptions Descartes asserts that mind can know only its own ideas. But since he is a rationalist he tries to justify the knowledge of the external world through clear and distinct ideas.

For knowledge of things, we can use four faculties, according to Descartes, viz., intellect, imagination, sense-perception and memory. However the truth can be known only through the intellect. Other faculties only assist in the exercise.

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As we have already stated, in our study, we will try to show that the ontological and the epistemological presuppositions of both G.E. Moore and A.J. Ayer can be traced back to the empiricist tradition of Locke, Berkeley and Hume. The British empiricists assume, on the lines of Descartes, that mind can know only its own ideas.

Before embarking on Locke’s philosophy and its link with the Cartesian dualism, we would like to briefly examine Descartes’ view on perception. In the Rules (1698), Descartes includes sense-perception among the faculties (others are, memory and perception) that assist the intellect in acquiring knowledge. In Optics (1637) Descartes asserts that it is the soul which has the sensory awareness, and not the body. “For when the soul is distracted by an ecstasy or deep contemplation, we see that the whole body remains without sensation, even though it has various objects touching it”25. Descartes is more inclined to take a causal view of perception. This is clear from his view that the impressions formed by the objects in the external parts of the body reach the soul in the brain through the nerves.

In the Meditations he refers to sense-perception as a mode of thinking26 in the sense that the mind without having perception can remain

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26 Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, in DSPW, 1988, p.87.
a thinking substance. However, perception as a mode of thinking depends on a thinking substance.

For Descartes the only immediate objects of sensory awareness are ideas. We will try to show in our study that for Locke, Berkeley and Hume too, the immediate objects of sensory awareness are ideas. Also, the British empiricists from Locke onwards accept the Cartesian view that the idea that one has of his mind is “much more distinct than the idea of any corporeal thing.” In fact from the idea of the self Descartes derives the idea of God and on this idea he bases “the knowledge of other things.”

In *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes reiterates that perception is a mode of thinking. He says: “Perception, volition and all the modes both of perceiving and of willing are referred to thinking substance...” And more specifically, he categorises the sensations such as those of “...pain, pleasure, light, colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, hardness and other tactile qualities” under those modes that arise from “the close and intimate union of our mind with the body”. Descartes concludes that we have “a clear and distinct perception of, some kind of matter, which is

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28 Ibid., p.99.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p.176.
extended..."\(^{32}\) and "the idea of it comes to us from things located outside ourselves, which it wholly resembles."\(^{33}\) This assertion of Descartes perhaps hints at the representative theory of perception which was later held by Locke.

A close examination of this brief account of Descartes' philosophy reveals how he is a precursor to so many important ideas adopted by the British empiricists from Locke onwards. As we have already made clear the Cartesian notion of 'idea' is accepted by Locke and his successors. Not only this, the Cartesian idea of mind as a thinking substance and matter as an extended substance has led the ominous trend in the theory of perception that mind which knows only its own ideas can never have a direct access to material thing. Thus, matter remains in Locke an unknown and unknowable substratum of primary qualities since mind cannot reach beyond the circle of its own ideas. Cartesian separation of two realms of mind and matter can also be considered to be behind the 'divide' between the knowledge of science and knowledge by senses. In Cartesian reasoning we also find lurking behind surreptitiously the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Take for example the following assertion of Descartes in which he considers the notion of shape, sizes and motion to be the clear and distinct notions with regard to material things: "(T)hat all the knowledge which men have of the natural world (scientific knowledge)


\(^{33}\) Ibid.
must necessarily be derived from these notions (of shapes, size, and motion); for all the other notions we have of things that can be perceived by the senses are confused and obscure, and so cannot serve to give us knowledge of anything outside ourselves, but may even stand in the way of such knowledge."[italics mine].\(^{34}\) Two things seem to be clear from the above quotation: first, the scientific knowledge has been assigned a separate realm that our perception may not penetrate. Second, the division of primary and secondary qualities lies implicit in Cartesian philosophy. Thus the whole debate of perception, centered as it is on 'the two tables of physics and commonsense' has its inception in the Cartesian bifurcation of mind and matter as two separate and non-interacting realms.

In addition, we may point out that the argument from illusion as a ground for disbelief in material thing, can be traced back to Cartesian doubt regarding the validity and reliability of senses. As Deascartes says: "Given, then, that our efforts are directed solely to the search for truth, our initial doubts will be about the existence of the objects of sense-perception and imagination. The first reason for such doubts is that from time to time we have caught out the senses when they were in error, and it is prudent never to place too much trust in those who deceive us even once".\(^{35}\)

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Descartes further adds that sensory perceptions "...do not, except occasionally and accidentally, show us what external bodies are like in themselves."\(^{36}\) This view, added with Locke's empiricism, perhaps makes the nature of material substratum of primary qualities unknown and unknowable. And as we have stressed, this issue remains at the centre of the problem of perception even for Moore and Ayer in whose philosophies it narrows down mainly to the problem of the relation between sense-data and material things. Finally, we may briefly state what we may call Descartes' causal view on perception. He asserts: "The perceptions we refer to things outside us, namely to the objects of our senses, are caused by these objects, at least when our judgements are not false. For in that case the object produce certain movements in the organs of the external senses, and, by means of the nerves, produce other movements in the brain, which cause the soul to have sensory perception of the objects."\(^{37}\) Locke too, we find, gives a causal explanation of perception. He also adopts Cartesian view of matter in motion and advances a corpuscular hypothesis.

Again, before ending this part of the chapter we may point out that we also find that what Descartes states to be the three most important questions regarding the objects of knowledge, continue to be the central questions on this issue even for the British empiricists; notwithstanding

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their different treatment of the subject. These three questions, according to Descartes, are: “What presents itself to us spontaneously? How can one thing be known on the basis of something else? What conclusions can be drawn from each of these?”

John Locke (1632-1704)

While Descartes is a rationalist, Locke is an empiricist. He considers all knowledge to be based on sense-experience. As he says, “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished?” He goes on to assert: “To this I answer, in one word, from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either about external sensible objects, or about internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.” Here we find that though Cartesian division of reality into mental and material is accepted by Locke, unlike

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40 *Essay*, II.i.2.
Descartes he holds an empiricist position. Lockean position is considered to be commonsensical and one important reason for this view perhaps is this: he reestablishes the reliability of the senses, the primary source of the knowledge based on common sense. For Locke, sensation is the “great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses.”\textsuperscript{41} Locke says that the senses convey the sensible ideas to the understanding. Another source “from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is the perception of the operation of our own minds within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got; which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without. And such are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing and all the different actings of our own minds.”\textsuperscript{42}

Thus Locke introduces perception as one of the operations of mind when it is “employed about the ideas it has got”.\textsuperscript{43} And even he asserts: “To ask at what time a man has first any ideas is to ask when he begins to perceive: having ideas and perception being the same thing.”\textsuperscript{44} It is clear here, Locke’s use of the word perception is very wide as it is equated with thinking–by which he means having of experience. Locke says “These two,

\textsuperscript{41} Essay, II.i.2.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. II.i.4  
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., II.i.9.
I say, viz, external material things as the objects of SENSATION, and the operations of our own minds within as the objects of REFLECTION, are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings.\textsuperscript{45}

The simple ideas, the materials of all our knowledge are derived through sensation and reflection. Locke defines ideas and qualities thus:

"Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea; and the power to produce any idea in our mind, I call quality of the subject wherein that power is. Thus a snowball having the power to produce in us the ideas of white, cold, and round, the power to produce those ideas in us as they are in the snowball I call qualities; and as they are sensations or perceptions in our own understandings, I call them ideas; which ideas, if I speak of sometimes as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those qualities in the objects which produce them in us."\textsuperscript{46}

Thus, idea for Locke is "the immediate objects of perception, thought, or understanding".\textsuperscript{47} On the other hand, quality of an object is the power to produce any idea in our mind.\textsuperscript{48} Primary qualities according to Locke are "utterly inseparable from the body".\textsuperscript{49} They are, namely solidity,
extension, figure, mobility, etc. The primary qualities produce in us the simple ideas of solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. "Secondly, such qualities which in truth are nothing in the object themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e. by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colours, sounds, tastes, etc. These I call secondary qualities."\(^{50}\) Locke says, "Though the qualities that effect our senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended that there is no separation, no distance between them, yet it is plain the ideas they produce in the mind enter by the senses simple and unmixed."\(^{51}\) While mind is passive in receiving simple ideas, it is active in formulating complex ideas. "When the understanding is once stored with these simple ideas, it has the power to repeat, compare, and unite them even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex ideas."\(^{52}\)

The causal mechanism involved in perception has been explained by Locke thus: "And since the extension, figure, number and motion of bodies of an observable bigness may be perceived at a distance by the sight, it is evident some singly imperceptible bodies must come from them to the eyes, and thereby convey to the brain some motion, which produce these

\(^{50}\) Essay., II.viii.10

\(^{51}\) Ibid., II.ii.2

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
ideas which we have of them in us." Thus Locke holds a corpuscular hypothesis. And we may recall that Descartes also gives a causal explanation of perception in his 'The Passions of the Soul.'

Stuart Brown remarks that Locke's talk about resemblance, led commentators to conclude that he is faced with the veil of perception problem. However, Brown's defence of Locke is not much justified, since resemblance is an important concept in Locke's theory of perception that is, it cannot be wished away; and Locke's treatment of the subject easily lands him in this problem.

Another point is, though Locke says that material substance is unknown and unknowable, his view of the nature of primary and secondary qualities lends support to the view that for him the material substance cannot remain unknown and unknowable. This is since he believes on the one hand that primary qualities are 'utterly inseparable' from the body; and on the other hand, at certain places, he accepts that the primary qualities can be perceived. They are "...sometimes perceived by us, viz., when the bodies they are in are big enough singly to be discerned." 

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53 Essay, II viii.12.
55 Essay, II.viii.22.
Another point that Locke makes about perception is that in perceiving the mind is passive. As he says: "For in bare naked perception, the mind is, for the most part, only passive; and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving." Locke does not accept the ordinary meaning of perception, for he defines it very broadly so as to equate it with thought. This is perhaps because the concept of perception is central to Locke’s theory of knowledge and by broadening the concept he could have explained all knowledge in terms of perception. This is clear from the following passage: "What perception is, everyone will know better by reflecting on what he does himself, when he sees, hears, feels, etc., or thinks..."  

According to Locke, while the mind is "wholly passive in the reception of all its simple ideas", it is active in forming complex ideas. He defines complex ideas thus: "Ideas thus made up of several simple ones put together, I call complex, such as are beauty, gratitude, a man, an army, the universe; which, though complicated of various simple ideas, or complex ideas made up simple ones, yet are, when the mind pleases, considered each by itself as one entire thing, and simplified by one name." Thus Locke takes up nominalist stand also. There are three kinds

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56 Essay, II.ix.1.  
57 Ibid., II.ix.2.  
58 Ibid., II.xii.1.  
59 Ibid., II.xii.1.
of complex ideas: Modes, Substances, Relations. He defines Modes thus: "Modes I call such complex ideas which, however compounded, contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are considered as dependences on, or affections of substances, such are the ideas signified by the words triangle, gratitude, murder, etc." While simple modes are combinations of the same simple idea, e.g., a dozen, a score; the mixed modes are formed of simple ideas of different kinds, e.g., beauty, theft.

Locke refers to substance as a confused idea. He says "...the ideas of substances are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves, in which the supposed or confused idea of substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief." As he adds later: "The idea then we have, to which we give the general name substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist sine re substante, without something to support them, we call that support substantia; which, according to the true import of the word, is, in plain English, standing under or upholding." Locke explains the idea of substance thus: "Thus, the idea of the sun, what is it but an aggregate of those simple ideas, bright, hot, roundish, having a constant regular motion,

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60 Essay, II.xii.4.
61 Ibid., II.xii.5.
62 Ibid., II.xii.6.
63 Ibid., II.xxiii.2.
at a certain distance from us, and perhaps some other: as he who thinks and discourses of the sun has been more or less a curate in observing those sensible qualities, ideas, or properties, which are in that thing which he calls the sun." 64 Here the idea of substance as held by Locke has some similarity with what Moore says about the material thing. Moore says that whenever we sense the sense-data, we perceive something more, something other than sensing of sense data, and this something else is material thing. Locke says in a similar way: "...that our complex ideas of substances, besides all these simple ideas they are made up of, have always the confused idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist; and therefore when we speak of any sort of substance, we say it is a thing having such or such qualities, as body is a thing that is extended, figured and capable of motion; a spirit, a thing capable of thinking; and so hardness, friability, and power to draw iron, we say, are qualities to be found in a load stone. These and the like fashions of speaking intimate that the substance is supposed always something besides the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking or other observable ideas, though we know not what it is". 65

As stated earlier, in the limited sense in which we are using the concept of negation of negation, a thinker while rejecting some of the ideas

64 Essay, II.xxiii.6.
65 Ibid., II.xxiii.3.
of a previous thinker takes for granted some of his other concepts. In a similar vein, though Locke rejects the rationalism of Descartes and takes an empiricist stand, he incorporates the Cartesian notion of ‘ideas’ as the immediate objects of perception. He further accepts that mind can know only its own ideas. About Locke’s acceptance of the term idea, Tipton points out that Locke “inherited the term and some of the obscurities that go with it.”

Another point is, though Locke accepts the mind-body dualism of Descartes, he differs from the latter in certain regards. First, though he considers mind and body to be separate, i.e., he accepts that “external objects are not united to our minds when they produce ideas in it”, yet he holds that there is interaction between mind and body, for ideas are produced in us by the bodies “manifestly by impulse”. Similarly, the ideas of secondary qualities are also produced “by the operation of insensible particles on our senses.”

Second, Locke while accepting the Cartesian premise that mind can know only its own ideas, criticises latter’s definition of mind as thinking substance. He says: “If such definition be of any authority I know not what

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68 Ibid., II.viii.11.
69 Ibid., II.viii.13.
it can serve for but to make many men suspect that they have no souls at all, since they find a good part of their lives pass away without thinking." \(^{70}\)

Third, unlike Descartes Locke does not equate body with extension. For him body is something that is both “solid and extended, whose parts are separable and movable in different ways..." \(^{71}\) Extension according to Locke is “only the space that lies between the extremities of those solid coherent parts, and which is possessed by them....” \(^{72}\) He holds that body and extension are two distinct ideas and gives following reasons for this view: first, extension does not include either solidity or resistance to the motion of body like body does; second, the parts of pure space are inseparable; third, the parts of pure space are immovable.

Another point is, while for Descartes we have clear and distinct ideas of both mind and body as spiritual and material substances respectively; for Locke we do not have any clear and distinct idea of either. As he says: “Hence, when we talk or think of any sort of corporeal substances, as horse, stone, etc, though the idea we have of either of them be but the complication or collection of those several simple ideas of sensible qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called horse or stone: yet, because we cannot conceive how they should subsist alone, nor

\(^{70}\) Essay, II.i.19.  
\(^{71}\) Ibid., II.xiii.1.  
\(^{72}\) Ibid., II.xiii.11.
one in another, we suppose them existing in and supported by some common subject, *which support we denote by the name substance*, though it be certain we have no clear or distinct *idea of that thing* we suppose a support.”

He holds a similar view about the spiritual substance: “...we have no clear and distinct *idea of the substance* of a spirit.” However he holds the view that we have clear and distinct perception of simple ideas.

An important point is that both Descartes and Locke supported the contemporary scientific world view. McCulloch points out that between Descartes and Locke there is “a shared commitment to the new mechanistic science which was at that time replacing established practice...” However, apart from this commitment, Locke also upholds common sense, at least the belief that through our senses we derive the knowledge of the existence of physical objects and that physical objects with their primary qualities exist independently of a perceiving subject. Locke thus attempts to link what can be said to be a common sense view of the reality of the material world and the need for scientific certainty in knowledge. This is the reason why Locke tries to give a mechanistic account of the way material object causes ideas in us based on a corpuscular hypothesis. And on the other hand he

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73 *Essay*, II.xxiii.4.
74 Ibid., II.xxiii.5.
75 Ibid., II.ii.2.
accepts the common sense view about the existence of material object. As Stuart Brown points out, Locke’s account “attempts to accommodate the scientific, as well as common sense, beliefs of the day...”77 We will try to bring out later, the problem of perception is basically the challenge thrown to common sense realism by scientific account of things, and by the fact of perceptual error. As we have already stated the seeds of doubting sense-based knowledge have roots in Cartesian scepticism about the senses. Since ‘the senses might deceive us’, the scientific knowledge about the external world, according to Descartes, should be based on demonstrative method. And the common sense knowledge like e.g. ‘this is a pen’, ‘this is a chair’ is based on two things, according to Descartes: our inclination to rely on senses and a non-deceiving God who secures its reliability.

Thus for Locke perception is a process that makes mind-body interaction seem possible.

George Berkeley(1685-1753)

We would begin this part with the observation made by G.J.Warnock that it is not “excessively unjust to Berkeley to say that his views were parasitic

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on the doctrines of Locke." 78 Berkeley, like his predecessor Locke, espouses empiricism; and also defines experience in terms of ideas. He too accepts that the mind is directly aware of its own ideas. However, Locke held a theory of perception which is called representative realism since according to it the ideas that we perceive are "somehow directly or immediately present to us and is also representing a real material world to us, a world of which we are not directly aware." 79 Berkeley holds that if we go by the account of perception advanced by Locke, it is impossible to have the knowledge of the external world. For we cannot know it either through senses or through reason. By Locke's definition, Berkeley says: "We have the knowledge only of our sensations, ideas, or those things that are immediately perceived by sense..." 80 Berkeley undertakes to criticise the notion of abstract ideas as being at the core of the theory of representative realism, i.e., in the words of Berkeley, "the opinion that might hath a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things." 81 Berkeley says in this regard:" For example, there is perceived by sight an object extended, colored and moved: this mixed or compound idea the mind resolving into its simple, constituent parts, and viewing each by

itself, exclusive of the rest, thus frame the abstract ideas of extension, color, and motion."\(^{82}\) Berkeley argues that since only particular ideas are present to the mind, they alone are intelligible; abstract ideas are vacuous for they do not specifically refer to some set of particular ideas. He then goes on to refute the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, by arguing that like primary qualities, the secondary qualities too are subjective and mind-dependent. Thus matter is not conceivable as the substratum of primary qualities. Hence about sensible things he says that their "esse is percipi".\(^{83}\) He says that they cannot exist unperceived and asserts: "... can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived?"\(^{84}\) Dancy points out: "It is the use of the notion of resemblance which Berkeley takes to be the weak point."\(^{85}\) He points out that since Berkeley holds that the relation of resemblance can hold only between ideas and not between ideas and things, Locke's account is falacious. Berkeley's argument is: "...an idea can be like nothing but an idea: a color or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but ever so little into thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p.26.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid., p.27.  
conceive a likeness except only between our ideas." 86 Berkeley claims that he is taking a common sense stand in refuting the material substance, as is clear from the following dialogue between Philonous and Hylas: Philonous says to Hylas: "...since this revolt from metaphysical notions to the plain dictates of nature and common sense, I find my understanding strangely enlightened, so that I can now easily comprehend a great many things which before were all mystery and riddle." 87 When Hylas exclaims on hearing this: "What! Can anything be more fantastical, more repugnant to common sense, or a more manifest piece of scepticism, than to believe that there is no such thing as matter?" 88 On this Philonous remarks: "What if it should prove, that you who hold there is, are by virtue of that opinion a greater sceptic, and maintain more paradoxes and repugnancies to common sense, than I who believe no such thing?" 89 We hold that Berkeley's approach is subjective idealist since for him the ultimate reality is mental and ideas depend on the perceiving subject for their existence. Suman Gupta points out that Berkeley's aim is basically "a refutation of materialism and a defence of idealistic empiricism." 90 Berkeley's position foreshadows phenomenalism and in that Ayer's position is similar to his

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
position. It will be pertinent to remark that clarification of language and thought which Ayer claims to be the aim of philosophy is also there on Berkeley's agenda. As Berkeley draws attention to what he calls the abuse of language, and undertakes to "...get clear of all controversies purely verbal; the springing up of which weeds in almost all the sciences has been a main hindrance to the growth of true and sound knowledge."\(^91\) And in order to attain "an entire deliverance from the deception of words"\(^92\), he claims that we have to define "what is meant by thing, reality, existence"\(^93\). Berkeley then goes on to define these words in a manner which suits his subjective idealist stand. Thus ideas become the 'real' things; they alone exist, as he says, "...what is meant by the term 'exist' when applied to sensible things. The table I write on I say exists—that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it."\(^94\) And this is the main idea behind phenomenalism, as we see in its linguistic version in Ayer, it changes into the possibility of translating the statements about material things into the statement about actual and possible sense-data; and in Ayer's language narrows down to speaking in

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\(^92\) Ibid.

\(^93\) Ibid., p.66.

\(^94\) Ibid., p.26.
terms of categorical and hypothetical statements. For we find that Ayer, who claims to reject metaphysics, lauds Berkeley: "Nor is it fair to regard Berkeley as a metaphysician. For he did not, in fact, deny the reality of material things as we are too commonly told...He maintained that to say of various 'ideas or sensations' that they belonged to a single material thing was not, as Locke thought, to say that they were related to a single unobservable underlying 'somewhat' in creation relations to one another. And in this he was right."95 George Novack remarks: "By refusing to go beyond the particularity of experienced things, Berkeley halted the process of knowledge at its initial and lowest level. Knowledge begins with the observation of separate and individual phenomena. But in the course of its development and deepening, the generalising mind sets aside whatever is incidental and accidental in the mass of particulars and forms categories and formulates laws...."96 We may here refer to Hamlyn's observation: "According to Descartes the constituents of the mind of which thinking is composed and which are revealed to self-consciousness are ideas, and by the time we come to Berkeley those ideas are conceived as inner by contrast with 'external things'."97 We would like to add here that Hamlyn's

observation about internal-external division points only to the bifurcation between mind and body created by Descartes, which is an important factor contributing to the problem of perception. Another point that can be made here is that by taking for granted the mental side of Cartesian dualism Berkeley reduces all reality to spirit and its ideas. And though he claims to uphold common sense as is evident from the assertions of Philonous who tries to convince the naive Hylas that the former’s position is commonsensical; however, by defining the terms like ‘real’, ‘exist’ and ‘being’ in a distorted way he goes far away from common sense.

In fact it is Berkeley who advances the argument from illusion to reinforce a subjective idealist ontology.98

Phil. Suppose now one of your hands hot, and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state; will not the water seem cold to one hand, and warm to the other? (p.158)

Or,

Phil. Even our own eyes do not always represent objects to us after the same manner. In the jaundice, everyone knows that all things seem yellow....From all of which, should it not seem to follow that all colours

are equally apparent, and that none of those which we perceive are rally inherent in any outward object?(p.166).

For Berkeley, who is concerned only to explain the continued ‘existence’ of things when no one is perceiving them, God serves as the sufficient explanation. Ayer takes a phenomenalist stand on the lines of Berkeley, but follows Hume in denying both mental and material substances, or in his own words, by reducing both mental and material substances to actual and possible sense-data.

**David Hume (1711–76)**

Taking up the thread from Berkeley Hume reduces the whole reality to mental discrete ‘impressions’. Like his predecessors Locke and Berkeley he too begins with experience as the only source of knowledge. He too takes for granted the mental side of Cartesian dualism like Berkeley. Mind or mental substance however, in his philosophy, is reduced to impressions. And it will not be out of context to note that much before logical positivists and Ayer, Hume held that “...we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of
human nature ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical."\textsuperscript{99}

Hume divides all perceptions into impressions and ideas which he defines thus: "Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence we may name impressions..."\textsuperscript{100}, on the other hand, he says, "By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning..."\textsuperscript{101} He further differentiates between simple and complex impressions and ideas: "Simple conceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction or separation. The complex are the contrary of these, and may be distinguished into parts."\textsuperscript{102} Hume goes on to argue that "all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent."\textsuperscript{103} Ayer’s sense-data are similar to Hume’s impression in the sense that impression is "a single perception, limited to the present moment."\textsuperscript{104} And like sense-data they cannot give any information beyond one’s present sense-experience. As Hume says: "That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, as external, is evident; because they

\textsuperscript{100} Hume, \textit{Treatise}, 1935, p.109.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 109.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., p.110.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p.112.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p.102.
convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of anything beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence..." Two points can be made here. First, the justification for our belief in the external object cannot come from impressions and ideas, and as Hume admits at one place, we must go beyond them. As Hume says, mind "looks further than what immediately appears to it...it certainly looks further, when from a single perception it infers a double existence..." The second point is impressions are not different from sense-data since according to Hume they are what immediately appear to the mind.

For Hume the question whether there is material object out there or not is not so important. The main point for him is, "'Tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions." And this is the view, we will see, is taken up by Ayer.

Hume makes Berkeley's refutation of Locke's primary qualities of matter complete by reducing all reality to impressions. He says, "...that there are three different kinds of impressions conveyed by the senses. The first are those of the figure, bulk, motion, and solidity of bodies. The

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106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., p. 67.
second those of colors, tastes, smells, sounds, heat and cold. The third are the pains and pleasures..."  

According to Hume impressions may be divided into: "Those of SENSATION and those of REFLEXION." He says: "An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion, because derived from it. These again are copied by the memory and imagination, and become ideas; which perhaps in their turn give rise to other impressions and ideas. So that the impressions of reflexion are only antecedent to their corresponding ideas; but posterior to those of sensation, and deriv’d from them."

Hume divides all knowledge into 'matters of fact' and 'relations of ideas', as he says: "All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas, and Matters of Fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra and

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108 Hume, Treatise, p.294.
110 Ibid., pp.7-8.
Arithmetic; in short; every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain.... The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible."¹¹¹ This division, we find, is already adumbrated in Descartes' philosophy. He says that "...physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable."¹¹²

The truth of propositions concerning 'relations of ideas' is known through intuition or demonstration. They are necessary and universal. However, the propositions of 'matters of fact' depend upon sense experience and thus are probable in nature. This bifurcation is taken by Ayer who considers all meaningful propositions to be either analytic or empirical. For Hume matters of fact mean the matter concerning "the existence of objects or of their qualities."¹¹³ However, he clarifies what he means by existence by saying that "the idea of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object..."¹¹⁴ In the same passage he says that

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.94.
"the conception of the existence of any object is no addition to the simple conception of it..."\textsuperscript{115}

After reducing all reality into simple, discrete impressions, the problem arises for Hume to relate them to make sense of what he calls 'matters of fact'. Thus, Hume brings in the notion of association of ideas in order to fill this gap and introduce us the relation of cause and effect as forming the basis of our reasoning concerning matters of fact. As he says: "All reasoning concerning matters of fact seem to be founded on the relation of \textit{Cause and Effect}. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses."\textsuperscript{116} The three important principles of association according to Hume are (a) resemblance, (b)contiguity, and (c) causality. According to Hume the knowledge of causal relation "is not, in any instance, attained by reasoning a priori; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other."\textsuperscript{117} While on the one hand, Hume bases all reasonings concerning matters of fact on the relation of cause and effect, on the other hand he asserts that the foundation of causal relation again is experience.\textsuperscript{118} Thus according to Hume all our belief in causal relation is a matter of psychology, a matter of belief and habit, as he says:


\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p.27.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p.32.
"All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived nearly from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object. Or in other words; having found, in many instances, that any two kinds of objects—flame and heat, snow and cold—have always been conjoined together, if flame or smoke be presented anew to the senses, the mind is carried by custom to expect heat or cold, and to believe that such a quality does exist, and will discover itself upon a nearer approach."

The problem faced by Moore is one of relating discrete impressions. We will try to show how Ayer borrows Hume's laws of association to make sense of his discrete sense-data, and how he accommodates Humean principles within his linguistic framework. Ayer who follows Hume, in denying both mental and material substances, faces the problem of explaining 'personal identity'.

We would like to conclude this part with the observation that the divide created between the world of science and the world of sense by Descartes' dualism is taken for granted by Locke. The latter's interpretation of knowledge through sense-experience as knowledge by way of ideas (a Cartesian legacy), adds to the Cartesian bifurcation of reality—and leads in Berkeley's philosophy to the denial of material substance. Stretched further, it leads to the denial of both mental and material substances in Hume. Ayer's philosophy is a continuation of this line of reasoning; while Moore takes the thread where common sense is counting its last breath.