

ANDRZEJ PÓŁTAWSKI

SENSES AND “SENSUAL DATA”*

Abstract. One of the main goals of modern philosophy was to achieve an in-depth insight into the foundations of empirical knowledge. The problem was expected to be resolved by the analysis of experience. However, the road to a plausible account of experience was at the very beginning obstructed by turning the analysis into a search for clear and distinctive elements of experience and by sticking to purely intellectual intuition as means of this analysis. Moreover, clear and distinctive elements of experience were thought of as the basis of cognitive certainty. Both psychology and philosophy, at least until the nineteen-thirties, were deeply influenced by this essentially rationalistic conception of sensor experience. It is gestalt psychology and phenomenology that should be merited for overcoming that ill-conceived model. Only by taking into account the immediate sensor relation between the human subject and the environment, it is possible to show the kind of unity which is the prerequisite of human intellect.

Keywords: sensual data; perception; empiricism

1. Introduction: Sensualist construction of impressions in modern empiricism. 2. Sensation (*das Empfinden*) according to Erwin Straus. 3. Sensation and perception 4. Conclusions: Traditional and modern concept of the senses

1. INTRODUCTION: SENSUALIST CONSTRUCTION OF IMPRESSIONS IN MODERN EMPIRICISM

Descartes, wishing to base his teaching on solid and unshakable foundations, considered the sensual cognition associated with the bodily functions of particular organs as unclear and uncertain. As a point of departure, he used his – to use a contemporary term – intentional experiences, *cogitationes*. Sensual experience – *sentire* – our direct, live contact with the real material world in its concrete

* This article was originally published in Polish as: A. Póltawski, *Zmysły i “dane zmysłowe”*, *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 40(2004)1, 53-60. The translation of the article into English was financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland as part of the activities promoting science – Decision No. 676/P-DUN/2019 of 2 April 2019. Translation made by GROJ Translations.

form was therefore eliminated. “Sense-perception (*sentire*)? One needs a body to perceive”¹. On the other hand, Descartes believes that sensation – precisely as *cogitatio* – belongs, after all, to this sphere of unquestionable, direct, clear and distinct cognition, to the separation of which out of the uncertain rest he was led by his method of doubt. It, therefore, appears on the next page of *Meditations on First Philosophy* as one of the varieties of *cogitare*, as an immanent feature.

In the further development of modern philosophy, the concept of sensual experience was developed and formulated more precisely, as impressions, some special variety of *cogitationes*, qualities that clearly and distinctly manifest themselves, fully, as it were, authoritatively and adequately outstretched before the “pure subject” that perceives them, and therefore – data, to use a term later coined by Husserl. This intellectualist construction was an even more urgent need for this philosophy as the legacy of Cartesian thought, which grew out of continental rationalism, was almost immediately taken over by British empiricism. This gave rise to this special variety of empiricism which was later continued by philosophy in the continental Europe; empiricism which operated with a rationalist *par excellence* conception of sensual experience.

It can be said that all modern psychology and philosophy, at least until as late as the dawn of the 20th century, and actually until the nineteen-thirties, faced the overwhelming influence of this concept. While in psychology it was gestalt psychologists that probably contributed the most to overcome it; in philosophy – it was phenomenologists, even though it still constituted a point of departure for Husserl himself, who until his death did not fully realise the ultimate consequences of his critique of modern sensualism. His most important contributions in this field can be found in his late manuscripts which have been published only partially so far².

1 R. Descartes, *Medytacje o pierwszej filozofii*, vol. 1, transl. M. and K. Ajdukiewiczowie, PWN, Warszawa 1958, 34.

2 An extensive discussion of this issue in Husserl's works, taking into account his unpublished manuscripts, can be found in E. Holenstein's *Phänomenologie der Assoziation. Zu Struktur und Funktion der passiven Genesis bei Husserl* (Phaenomenologica, vol. 44), Springer, Den Haag 1972.

In any case, starting from the thirties of our century, the analysis of sensual experience has begun to take on a distinct shape, separating itself from the traditional construction of the object from pure impressions.

An interpretation of the construction of our experience from sensual materials (data) which is very influential in modern empiricism, is proposed by Friedrich Kambartel; sensual materials or impressions are according to this conception:

(1) devoid of form and meaning, they assume their form and meaning only through the intellect, through intellectual forming and assignment of meaning;

(2) they constitute the basis for all cognition – they are the basis in two ways, i.e. on the one hand as the first and only materials appearing in the consciousness of a new-born child – on the other hand, as a material from which all legitimate, authentic concepts should be constructed;

(3) impressions essentially can always be distinguished from the outcomes of their intellectual processing; they are therefore always accessible in their original form³.

Thus, it can be said that according to empiricism understood in this way, our cognition of sensual materials is intuitive: they are objects that can be provided immediately in their entirety and in a direct way. Within this meaning they can also be considered as simple and general qualities, that is general concepts – or as absolute individual objects which always have a specific place in a particular stream of consciousness of the subject that experiences them. In the tradition of empiricism, however, they were considered to be an individual, not a universal.

In his *Logical Investigations* Edmund Husserl still takes this understanding of the empiricist conception – at least to some extent – as his point of departure, and the scheme “interpreted contents – their interpretation as...” (for example, as a perceived table) is of fundamental importance for his theory of the constitution of the object and his transcendental philosophy.

3 See: F. Kambartel, *Erfahrung und Struktur, Beiträge zur Kritik des Empirismus und Formalismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1968.

In this approach, what is given by the senses is limited to impressions or “sensual data”, and the entire meaning of cognition is given to these data by the intellect.

2. SENSATION (*DAS EMPFINDEN*) ACCORDING TO ERWIN STRAUS

This atomistic and intellectualist theory of experience was contrasted in the nineteen-thirties by Erwin Straus – a scholar from whom Maurice Merleau-Ponty undoubtedly learned a lot – with the conception of sensation as a separate, total way of communing with the world; a way which in its pure form can be attributed to animals. Sensation cannot be considered, as it is in the case of Descartes and his school, as a worse variety of cognition or an operation merely providing elements as if building blocks, from which cognition is to be built. As a form of communication, sensation involves the spectrum of senses, each of which constitutes a specific mode of our communication with the world. This communication is, however, in its whole range, as pointed out by Straus, total, which means that it constitutes the communication of the subject as a whole with the world, which also acts as a whole in such a communication – the whole is always diversified and becomes more diversified in the lifetime. Nonetheless, sensation is a symptomatic way of communication, as it constitutes a component of the becoming of a subject together with the world, and in the world; it is also a sensation of the subject with its world. None of these two poles, self and the world, has priority over the other. I experience my actuality with the actuality of the world, and I experience it in a primary way when I am directed towards the world and when at the same time the world is directed towards me.

A primary phenomenon of sensation is what is distant and what is close. Sensation is ordered in the space-and-time form of closeness and distance. Since sensation happens in space and time, and not just in space, or just in time, this form is also spatio-temporal, there is a primary unity of sensing and movement. It can also be said that the primary sensual life is the life of sensation and movement, a becoming.

3. SENSATION AND PERCEPTION

The difference between sensation and perception is compared by Straus to the difference between a landscape and the geographical space. A landscape always has a horizon, which does not exist in the geographical space. A landscape is open, we can walk from one place to another in it; each of these places has a characteristic area of visibility distinguishing it from other places and determines its relation to them. Although in a landscape we can go from one place to another, the place in which we are is never in a visible and defined (überschaubar) relation to the world as a whole. Objective cognition can only be achieved by placing its objects in an environment of geographical space and objective time. Perception searches unity, it is fact-oriented. It is never a set of, or a reproduction of impressions appearing in the sphere of sensation, it is not simply a result of comparing them and discriminating between them. To be able to compare and discriminate, we have to go beyond the horizon of sensation and find ourselves in the geographical space and in the objective time.

What are the consequences of the findings of these analyses for our deliberations? Straus emphasises the mutual relation between the subject and the world, the "total" relationship between them of mutual becoming. He also discusses how the world becomes more diverse for the self and stresses that the world has always been, from its beginning, diversified; moreover, as it has already been mentioned, sensation (and therefore, even more so, perception which is based on it) is, according to Straus, a "total" relationship between the subject and the world. What organisation of a sensing living organism should be assumed to allow the possibility of the existence of such a relationship?

To explain this situation one should, in the author's opinion, first of all, clearly distinguish between the world understood as what is real and one's own model of the world. This distinction is an assumption, as it seems, in Straus' description of sensation; and contemporary psychology, ethology, and *cognitive science* widely justify the existence – the necessity of existence – of a functioning model of the world of each living organism: there has to exist a structure enabling the behaviour of

these organisms in accordance with their instinct to survive or preserve the species. In animals, this model of the world simply functions and is not consciously construed by them. Man, on the other hand, constructs and consciously transforms his conceptual model of the world.

The difference between the sensual, functioning and conceptual, consciously shaped model of the world strictly corresponds to Straus' distinction between "sensing" on the one hand, and perception and cognition on the other. This last, specifically human behaviour, is intermediated by language. Henri Ey expressed it in his concise definition: "to be conscious means to have at one's disposal a personal model of the world"⁴.

It is obvious that our model of the world, even in its human, conceptual layer or variety, is not *given* to a subject in the same way in which we are given trees or persons in perception. An enormous part of it is not given to us at all; however, it has to function, as if anonymously, if we are to be aware of anything. No object given to us in the traditional meaning of the word would be given without the functioning of this model in the background of our conscious lives, and we must be constantly referring to this model to recognize objects with which we deal, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish two elements or moments within our field of consciousness; this field would remain empty.

4. CONCLUSIONS: TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CONCEPT OF THE SENSES

Let us try to juxtapose these reflections with the traditional conception of senses by Thomas Aquinas as formulated by Etienne Gilson. He states that Aquinas' theory underlines that:

(1) The unity of the human *continuum* and the fact that it is that that recognises – and not just the senses or intellect alone; "animal sensibility (*la sensibilité*) is already much more than a passive recording of sense impressions. The behaviour of animals proves that they are capable of acquiring a purely sensible experience, ... their

⁴ H. Ey, *La conscience*, PUF, Paris 1968², 36.

reactions frequently imitate the action of reasoning"⁵. This ability was called in the middle ages *vis aestimativa*. Man, to the extent to which he is a living organism (*animal*), also has this ability. However, in man, it was called *vis cogitativa*, or even *ratio particularis* because, although not being the function of reason, it functions in man as sensual experience of a reasonable being. This type of experience has *aliquam affinitatem et propinquitatem ad rationem universalem, secundum quendam refluentiam*⁶. The mind and the senses of the human subject closely penetrate each other. "Man recognizes what he senses, and he senses what he recognises"⁷.

(2) Everything, including the first principles, originates, according to Aquinas, in the senses. *Omnis nostra cognitio originaliter constitit in notitia primorum principiorum indemonstrabilium. Horum autem cognitio in nobis a sensu oritur*⁸. However, Gilson stresses that using this phrase is not equivalent to its understanding. Almost all contemporary readers who are strongly influenced by idealism, "will conclude from these words that if a man did not perceive any sensual object, the intellect would be unable to formulate the first principle, however, he has this principle in him and has the right to attribute it to things. In fact, the man shapes it in his own light, but he borrows its content from sensual data"⁹.

Therefore, we have access to a special sphere of sensual communion with what surrounds us. Although it is essentially the domain of the senses, it cannot be cut off the domain of the intellect, it constitutes an organic unity with it. It is due to this unity, and only within it, that the human intellect can function at all, as it provides all content for it, and shows it all its objects. Although even animals are equipped with it, in man this domain is different, as it is the domain of sensual experience of a reasonable being – as Gilson puts it – of "sensual empiricism of

5 E. Gilson, *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance*, J. Vrin, Paris 1947, 206. (Text by Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica* I, q. 78, art. 4 ad 5-m).

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 205.

8 *Ibid.*, 200f. (Text by Thomas Aquinas: *De Veritate*, q. X, art. 6 *Praeterea*).

9 *Ibid.*

man” which depends on operations which much more resemble the operations of the mind than the respective operations in animals¹⁰.

Difficulties appear – says Gilson – when we treat the sensual as the conceptual. We then require from the order of concrete empirical facts to correspond to the logic of abstract notions, and we turn to idealists. The sphere of sensual intuition – seamlessly passing into the sphere of intellectual perspective – requires, therefore, to be treated separately, within it one cannot mistake the sensory for the conceptual, one has to be able to distinguish one from the other.

After quoting the above sentence of Aquinas about the affinity of sensual experience and reason in man, Gilson notes that: “These notions are intentionally indefinite, it would be the task of psychology today to bestow precise content on them”¹¹.

There is another point in Gilson’s deliberations that should be clearly emphasised. The field of sensual intuition is the domain in which the existence of the real object presents to us; as emphatically formulated by Gilson: “a being’s act of existence, not its essence, is the ultimate foundation of what we know to be true”¹². When catching the real world, things and living organisms in it, as if “red-handed” in their existence, and this is what happens in sensual communion, we at the same time catch it *in actu* – in a scholastic sense. So it will probably not be a far fetched use of the terms here if we say: in dynamic contact between us – the human *compositum* and the reality surrounding it.

It turns out that the intellectualist construction of the domain of experience put forth by Descartes and Hume was a gross falsification in which pre-predicative, and in some sense pre-cognitive primary data were presented as an element of conceptual cognition, which obviously must have led to their deformation. If we, therefore, agree that one of the main tasks of modern philosophy is to deepen the foundations of empiricism by the analysis of experience, at the same time it has to be said that the road to realising this task was, perhaps not completely

10 *Ibid.*, 207.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

obstructed (because despite the false interpretation of what it describes, this philosophy has made enormous and fertile efforts in this direction), but it was presented in a false light and made much more difficult for nearly two centuries by inextricably linking this analysis with a search for what may be formulated clearly and distinctly in pure intellectual intuition, and what should be absolutely certain.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Descartes R., *Medytacje o pierwszej filozofii*, vol. 1, transl. M. and K. Ajdukiewiczowie, PWN, Warszawa 1958.
- Ey H., *La conscience*, PUF, Paris 1968².
- Gilson E., *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance*, J. Vrin, Paris 1947.
- Holenstein E., *Phänomenologie der Assoziation. Zu Struktur und Funktion der passiven Genesis bei Husserl*, (Phaenomenologica, vol. 44), Springer, Den Haag 1972.
- Kambartel F., *Erfahrung und Struktur, Beiträge zur Kritik des Empirismus und Formalismus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1968.

Andrzej Póltawski

DOI: 10.21697/spch.2020.56.S1.06