

VII.—DISCUSSIONS

THE SPECIOUS PRESENT

MR. C. W. K. MUNDLE'S article in *MIND*, Vol. LXIII (Jan. 1954) entitled 'How Specious is the "Specious Present"?' is a reply to my paper 'Our Direct Experience of Time' in *MIND*, Vol. LX (April 1951). It falls into three parts. First, he accuses me of misrepresenting Broad's theory and directing my arguments not against it but against my own man-of-straw. Second, he argues that a theory of Broad's type can be held without accepting an act-object analysis of experience. Third, he presents his own view of the evidence for the Specious Present and for its epistemological importance. In the present note I shall comment briefly on his first part; I shall completely neglect his second part (since I think any formulation of the theory implicitly brings in the act-object distinction and is open to the criticisms I originally urged); I shall discuss his third part, emphasizing particularly how completely his theory of the Specious Present differs from that of the psychologists whom I was criticizing and from the analysis of Professor Broad.

I devoted my previous article to Broad's analysis both because it was the only full-length treatment I knew, and also because it seemed to me to elucidate with complete accuracy and fairness the ideas implicit in the previous psychological work on the Specious Present. Did I misrepresent Broad? I agree that on one issue (a purely verbal one) I did. Broad used the term 'Specious Present' to refer to the duration of an event which would be apprehended as a whole by an act of sensing which had no duration (an act which is the limit of the series of acts of diminishing duration). Broad then had to face the difficulty how there could be experimental evidence for the duration of the Specious Present, when it is impossible to perform an act of no duration, and therefore impossible to measure the duration of the event which such an act would apprehend. If we are to measure the duration of an event apprehended as a whole by any actual act of apprehension, that act itself must have duration. (We have to assume for the purposes of the analysis that it makes sense to talk of an act of apprehension apprehending an event as a whole.) Now what would be the duration of an event which would be apprehended as a whole by an act of finite duration? I refer to Mundle's diagram on page 28 of his article. The top line represents the duration of acts of apprehension. My question (and Broad's) was this. If we admit the notion of an act being aware of an event as a whole—which is the defining characteristic of the Specious Present—what is the duration of the event of which, as a whole, an act lasting from O_1 to O_2 would be aware? As I said in my paper, the temptation is to say that it would be the event $e_1 - e_2$. But

Broad's answer (and the correct answer on all these assumptions) is $e_2 - e'_1$. Now my 'misrepresentation' was to call the event $e_2 - e'_1$ the Specious Present of act $O_1 - O_2$. Broad limits 'Specious Present' to the event apprehended as a whole by a momentary act. As Mundle rightly says, for Broad the Specious Present has a *constant* length ($e_1 - e'_1$ or $e_2 - e'_2$). I used it as if its length was variable. But this was a merely verbal matter, and makes no difference at all to my arguments. Instead of talking of 'the Specious Present of any actual act of awareness—i.e. of any act having duration', I ought to have spoken of 'the duration of the event grasped as a whole by any actual act of awareness'.

Mundle and I agreed that it was a waste of time to quarrel about whether my account was a travesty of Broad when Broad could answer for himself. So we sent Broad our two articles. I added a specific question on the point on which my main attack was based. I wrote 'I was wrong in talking of the Specious Present of an act of awareness of finite duration. What I ought to have said is that the stretch of time [or event] $e_1 - e'_2$ bears the same relation (that of being grasped as a whole) to the act $O_1 - O_2$ as the Specious Present bears to the momentary act. So that, if an actual experiment could be made to discover what stretch of time [or event] was grasped as a whole by an act of apprehension, since any *actual* act of apprehension in real life would have a duration, it would reveal a stretch of time [or event] grasped as a whole which would be necessarily shorter than the Specious Present (i.e. the stretch [or event] which *would* be grasped by a *momentary* act). Now what I want to know is whether *that* is a misrepresentation?' (Mundle has pointed out to me that 'event' would be better than 'stretch of time', which is what I wrote to Broad, because this suggests that we can apprehend empty time. Hence my insertions of 'event' above.) Broad replied 'Mundle's account of my doctrine which he gives on pages 28-30 seems to me quite correct. I think it follows that "since any *actual* act of apprehension . . . would have duration" an actual experiment "would reveal a stretch of time grasped as a whole which would be shorter than the Specious Present".' Broad made no complaint of misrepresentation by me on any other point, so I think I am now justified in rejecting Mundle's charge of erecting a man-of-straw. Broad says he certainly does not think my article a travesty of his views, though he would be unwilling to express a judgment on the validity of my arguments without fuller consideration.

It follows directly from Broad's admission, just quoted, that the longer the act of apprehension the shorter the event which such an act could grasp as a whole. Yet this is what Mundle describes as my 'most serious misunderstanding' of Broad. He says 'this would entail that the longer one looks or listens to something, the briefer is the duration of what is seen or heard' (pp. 28, 29). Let us rewrite this in my terminology, approved by Broad above. 'The

longer an act of looking or listening is, the shorter is the event which such an act could grasp as a whole ?' This is precisely what Broad's analysis does entail, and it is one of the paradoxical consequences I suggested in order to reject it.

The other paradoxical result was that any actual act of apprehension, with its finite duration, would apprehend as a whole an event which would be wholly past when the act of apprehension begins. As Mundle does not seem to think that is a misrepresentation of Broad or even a paradox, I did not ask Broad to substantiate it. I need only quote two passages in support of it. 'The beginning of a process of sensing, throughout the whole of which an event of finite duration is sensed, is contemporary with the end of the event in question' (*Scientific Thought*, p. 359). 'The prehended phrase is completely past at the moment when it first begins to be prehended' (*Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, vol. ii, p. 278). That Broad's analysis does justice to the psychologist who first advanced the theory can be seen from E. R. Clay's statement: 'The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past—a recent past—delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future' (Quoted by W. James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. i, p. 609).

There are some minor matters to be cleared up at this stage. First, Mundle says (p. 27) 'When Broad wrote *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, he had apparently lost faith in the specious present doctrine.' It seemed to me clear that in this work Broad accepted the doctrine as uncompromisingly as anywhere (and Broad has confirmed this when we submitted our differences to him).

Secondly, Mundle says that when I say 'the aim was to discover the unit of temporal experience' I am 'assuming that the philosophers who invoke the doctrine do so because they think of a person's experience as consisting of a row of sense-data laid out, so to speak, end to end' (pp. 26-27). I am not. I was making a historical assertion about the psychologists of the 'nineties, not about the philosophers of today. (Note Mundle's switch of tenses from my 'the aim was' to his 'invoke'.) There is abundant evidence for my assertion in the work of Wundt's followers (and this interpretation of their motives is endorsed by Munsterberg and by Boring whom I quoted on page 165 of my original paper). The assertion that Darwin devised the theory of evolution to explain certain similarities in biological species does not mean that philosophers who now invoke the theory do so with this aim—they may well do so to justify fascist politics or Nietzschean ethics.

Thirdly, I agree with Mundle (p. 31) that I did not raise the fundamental question whether it makes sense to postulate datable acts of apprehension and to speak of the temporal relation between such acts and the events they apprehend. I am indeed dubious about this. But the aim of my paper was negative and critical. On my view the whole doctrine depends on these assumptions (for

I do not think Broad's later presentation escapes them). Thus, if they are open to objection, that is one further reason, in addition to those I cited, for rejecting the Specious Present theory as upheld by the psychologists I quoted and as analysed by Broad.

There is finally one issue not raised by Broad but urged by me as an additional weakness in the theory. This turns on the two independent sets of experiments on which the theory rested: first, those on estimating time intervals which place the Specious Present at 0.75 second, and second, those on recognizing sound groups which extend it to 12 or even 36 seconds. I pointed out that, if the latter experimenters had worked with Africans skilled in drum-tap signalling or if they had tested the recognition without error of *tunes*, the resultant durations might well have run up to 10 or 20 minutes. E. R. Clay said 'All the notes of a bar of a song seem to the listener to be contained in the present' (quoted by James, *loc. cit.*). On the recognition test, there seems no reason for the limitation to one bar. Mundle does not seem at all worried by this double set of evidence, with these widely differing results. He suggests that 0.75 seconds (given by the first set) may be the average duration of the Specious Present and the 12 seconds (or 20 minutes), given by the second set, the maximum duration. But this seems to me very odd. Take the spatial parallel. What is the spatial extent of a directly given datum? One answer may be given by estimating the area prehended by a *coup d'oeil* (or by a fixed stare). The answer of course would be an angular one, or in the form 'an area six feet by three feet at four feet range'. Or I might ask instead what is the biggest visual pattern which can be recognized without error. A regular pattern would be easier to recognize than a random one; and a multicoloured pattern easier than a monochrome. And again the trained observer would recognize larger patterns. But anyone who said that 'extent of spatial datum' was a name for the areas revealed by *both* these tests would be confusing two different types of area determined by totally different criteria and answering totally different questions.

It is clear, however, from his article (and he has agreed in later correspondence) that Mundle does not think the concept of the Specious Present of any value in quantitative or experimental psychology, and therefore is unshaken by arguments urged against the original work which claimed to measure it. Nevertheless, he thinks there are experiences which require it as an instrument of analysis. And he believes it is also epistemologically necessary; for unless there were events which could be directly apprehended as including change or motion there could be no ostensive definition of temporal terms, *e.g.* 'past'. He points out that many philosophers, including Russell and Ayer, have used the concept in this way and for this purpose.

Mundle distinguishes two sets of experiences which might seem relevant to this discussion. There are experiences of 'fading' or

'lingering' *sensa*, which he thinks are appropriately analysed by a Specious Present theory. And there are experiences of noticing immediately after it has happened something which at the time one did not notice. The latter he calls, following Russell, cases of 'immediate memory'. I accept his examples in both fields, and I think he is right to distinguish them sharply and to hold that the Specious Present theory is not appropriate in the latter cases. I shall therefore say no more about 'immediate memory'.

Mundle applies the Specious Present theory to the case of 'lingering' or 'fading' visual *sensa*. We have to maintain that during the fading or lingering phase I am directly aware, though in a fading or lingering way, of a *past* visual datum. Mundle points out that this analysis is necessary on a direct theory of perception. For suppose I whisk a white piece of paper across my field of view. At the same time as I am aware of its bright whiteness at one side of the field I shall be aware of a fading or lingering streak in the centre of the field. Now if the central part of the datum is identical with part of the surface of an object this part must be *past*, since I am visually aware of the bright white colour as present in another place. This is fair so far as it goes. But it does not support the view that I am aware of an *immediately* or *recently* past event (and all versions of the Specious Present theory, from Clay onward, as quoted above, have held this view). For suppose I was seeing not a piece of paper but a falling star. Then, on a direct theory of sensation, I should not apprehend an event belonging to the 'recent past' (Clay) nor one which 'ceases to exist at the moment the apprehension of it begins' (Broad).

Mundle recognizes that on a *sensum* or sense-datum analysis the Specious Present interpretation is not necessary. But he thinks it optional, and the option must be accepted for the epistemological reasons connected with ostensive definition. On a *sensum* theory we may describe the 'lingering' or 'fading' experience in two ways. (1) I am now sensing, in a fading way, a *sensum* which does not now exist but which was in the centre of my field of view at an earlier moment. (This is the Specious Present analysis.) (2) I am now sensing in the centre of my field of view a *sensum* contemporary with the act of sensing but having a 'faded' character. (This does not involve the Specious Present analysis.) Mundle's argument here seems to me admirably clear and fair. He goes on to say that most philosophers have not faced these alternatives and he does not know which would be chosen by those who use a *sensum* or sense-datum terminology. But I myself have no doubt that it would be the second alternative. This is borne out by the cases of senses other than sight. Mundle admits that, in the cases of touch and smell, the Specious Present analysis is not required even on a theory of direct perception. If I draw a cold penny across my cheek I am aware of a lingering sensation of coolness even after the contact with the penny has ceased. But I need not locate this lingering coolness

in the past penny, for I can locate it in my present cheek. (Similarly, I suppose, a smell that lingers after onions have been removed can be located in the present air instead of in the past onions.) On a sensum analysis, I should have thought the second alternative above was the natural one for all senses. If I have a lingering taste in my mouth after eating peppermints, it would seem a gratuitous complication to suggest that the lingeringness qualifies the sensing, and that the sensum I apprehend is the strong peppermint sensum of some seconds ago. This seems not only to impart an unnecessary time problem. It suggests that I should be aware from the nature of the taste sensum (without memory) that it was 'of' strong peppermint. But surely it would be more naturally described as 'a faint taste of peppermint' and would be indistinguishable from such a faint taste as I might have for some other reason, e.g. if I was smelling peppermint. Similarly 'the sound is *still* ringing in my ears' is the natural description of lingering sound. If, as Mundle mentions elsewhere (p. 34), *sensa* are correlated with electrical disturbances in the brain and 'such disturbances die down gradually' it is more plausible to hold that such a dying disturbance is correlated with a contemporaneous faded sensum than to correlate it with a special kind of sensing of a previous vivid sensum. So too with sight. It is more plausible to regard an after-image as having its qualities at the time it is apprehended than as involving the sensing of a previous sensum, especially as the sensing would have to be erroneous, since a red sensum would be sensed as green. Thus I think that on a sensum analysis the specious present theory, that fading *sensa* are *past* *sensa* sensed in a peculiar way, is neither necessitated nor even plausible.

I shall now indicate how greatly Mundle's theory of the Specious Present differs from its predecessor which was the subject of my original examination. We have already seen that he rejects any notion of experimental measurement of its duration (which was the main preoccupation of the previous theorists). But there is an even more significant difference. The Specious Present psychologists, and Broad in his analysis of their concept, believed that the Specious Present was a *continuing* characteristic of *all* temporal experience. At all times I am experiencing events which belong to the immediate past. This is implicit in the searchlight analogy which Mundle approves. James says 'We are *constantly* conscious of a certain duration—the specious present' (*Principles of Psychology*, vol. i, p. 642). Broad says 'What a person prehends *at any moment* is of finite duration' (*Examination of McTaggart's Philosophy*, vol. ii, p. 283). (My italics in both quotations.)

Now does Mundle think that fadingness or lingeringness is to be found in all our experience? I should say they are not. It is only when a striking sensation, e.g. of sound, is followed by a period of silence or of continuous gentle sound that this phenomenon is observable. Only bright lights leave after-images. Consider, if the

phenomenon were continuously occurring, what would happen when I heard a continuous noise from a uniform source—a prolonged blast on a siren. In the first second I would hear the blast itself; in the second I would hear the blast continuing but reinforced by the fading blast of the first second. Thus a blast on a single note and of a uniform intensity would appear to increase after its beginning as well as to fade after the siren ceased. Moreover, Mundle suggests the lingering sensum is correlated with the dying down of disturbances in the brain. But then, if Specious Present phenomena occurred during as well as after the blast of the siren, this would require that a brain disturbance was dying down at the same time as it was continuing at full force. I think, therefore, that fading and lingering experiences are exceptional (like after-images and 'déjà vu' illusions). Thus they do not provide (as the Specious Present theory was previously supposed to provide) a basis for a theory about an all-pervasive character of our experience.

Of course, for the epistemological purpose for which Mundle requires the Specious Present (to make possible ostensive definitions of temporal terms) it is unnecessary that the Specious Present experience should be all-pervasive. In order for me to give an ostensive definition of 'red' it is not necessary (and indeed fatal) if all my experiences are red. Mundle himself admits this. 'If, however, our interest in the Specious Present doctrine is solely to provide a way of giving ostensive definitions of temporal concepts, it is immaterial whether the doctrine is cashable in terms of all sensations, so long as it is cashable in some cases' (p. 40).

I have shown that I do not think that any of the experiences quoted by Mundle require or indeed plausibly suggest the Specious Present explanation. What then about his view that, unless the Specious Present theory is correct, there can be no ostensive definition of temporal terms? Whatever 'ostensive definition' may be, it cannot be an activity which takes no time at all; and if so it must refer to a process which itself takes time. If I am asked by a foreigner what the English word 'flickering' means I shall point at a flickering light and expect my questioner to have a sensum of flickering (which will take time—'flicker' entails this). This is not a Specious Present view, for his sensum of flickering will be contemporaneous with his act of attending and last as long as that act does (whereas on the Specious Present view his datum would be past before he began to apprehend it and would vary in duration with his act of apprehension). Such sensa would provide him with ostensive definitions of temporal terms such as 'still going on', 'increasing', or 'diminishing'. But there is one temporal term (and it is interesting that it is the only one Mundle cites) of which no ostensive definition can be given by these experiences. That is, the term 'past'. I see no difficulty here. 'Past' is definable by reference to the relation of 'before and after', of which ostensive definition can be given, and to the utterance of the word 'past' or of its tense

equivalents. (Cf. H. Reichenbach, *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, pp. 284-287.) It need not itself be ostensively definable. Does Mundle think there can be an ostensive definition of 'future'? I take it he does not accept James' saddleback theory of the Specious Present, that at every moment I am apprehending events which have not yet occurred (as well as events which have just occurred). Nor will he provide experiences parallel to the fading or lingering experience in which I apprehend (crescendo, if that is the correct contrary to fadingly, lingeringly, or diminuendo) events which are about to happen. The epistemological demands can therefore be met without a Specious Present theory. All we need is the harmless general proposition that any direct awareness of anything whatever includes an awareness of time factors (before and after, etc.). This I should be very ready to allow.

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