

ON NOT SEEING DOUBLE

When Richard Taylor and Timothy Duggan, in their paper " On Seeing Double ", attempt to defend the astounding conclusion that many familiar objects around us have been appearing double all our lives without our knowing it, they have taken an indefensible position. In their article¹ Taylor and Duggan take note of an experiment made by Thomas Reid and recorded in his *Enquiry into the Human Mind*, the directions for which are summarized as follows :² (1) Look at any object a few feet or more distant, such as a candle flame or a door knob; (2) obtrude a finger into your line of vision; (3) while still looking at the more distant object, attend to your finger, which will now be noticed to present the appearance of two somewhat blurry fingers. (It may seem a priori impossible to look at one thing and visually attend to another, but it is in fact quite easy.) Now, finally, (4) look at your finger, but attend to the more distant object; the finger now appears as one, but the other thing as two. The inference which Reid draws from this experiment,³ and the one that Taylor and Duggan defend, is that, "Whenever we look at anything at all,⁴ then everything roughly in our line of vision, hither or thither to the thing we are looking at, appears double, though we normally don't realize it". But this is a queer thing to say ! How is it possible that something should appear to me in any way (let alone double) without my noticing it at all ? Isn't it true that an appearance itself is no more than what appears, or is in some way noticed ?² Taylor and Duggan's defence of Reid's conclusion consists in refuting three statements of possible ways out of the paradox of double vision (only the first two of which concern us here). The first statement is a rather weak one and Taylor and Duggan refute it easily enough, but let us consider it anyway for what it may tell us about the second possible way out. Basically, it is the position which holds that there is nothing in our visual experience except what we are directly attending to. This is obviously false, for if we suddenly removed all other things which we were not attending to, we would notice that something was missing.⁵ " The hunter taking aim on a partridge surely is visually aware of the gun barrel, twigs and other things intervening; if all these were suddenly annihilated, he would realize "

¹Taylor, R., and Duggan, T.: " On Seeing Double " (*Philosophical Quarterly*, April 1958, pp. 171-4). ²*ibid.*, p. 171. ³Reid, T.: *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. Hamilton, pp. 164-165. ⁴Taylor and Duggan note here that the experiment is inconclusive for distant objects and certain only for objects within 15-20 feet. p. 172. ⁵Taylor, R., and Duggan, T., *op. cit.*, p. 173.

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that something, to which he was not attending, had suddenly disappeared, leaving only himself and the partridge ". This, of course, does not prove that there are completely unnoticed sense data, but only that there are certain data which are noticed more clearly than others. Thus, the partridge is most clearly noticed, but the twigs, etc., are noticed also, although vaguely. Taylor and Duggan believe that we can say that these vague appearances are actually double, even before we directly attend to them. Otherwise, they say, we would be committed to the view that

these are not double until attended to, which is, ad hoc, vacuous, and which ascribes the extraordinary power of being able to double appearances to the mere act of attending. Indeed we would be committed to this view, but it is a sufficient one to answer Taylor and Duggan. First, let us consider the charge that it is vacuous or that there is in principle " no way of confirming or disconfirming it, since no one can check on the characteristics of unnoticed appearances ". Of course it would be impossible to check on unnoticed characteristics of appearances, because there are no such things. True, there are characteristics which are not directly attended to, but we can't say that to check on these would be to check on unnoticed characteristics, for these are noticed -they are merely vague. In point, Taylor and Duggan have confused their own terms-attended to and noticed. There are many things in a visual sense datum which are unattended to (the gun barrel, twigs, etc., in the previous example), but these do appear in some way; they are not unnoticed. If they were completely unnoticed, then removing them from the visible sense datum (as Taylor and Duggan suggest in their argument) would be impossible. In short, something may be unattended to, although not completely unnoticed. Consequently, we are entitled to check on their characteristics, and when we do we find that the only way we can accurately describe them is to say that they are vague-not single, not double, but simply vague. If one admits that a certain part of an appearance is vague (as Taylor and Duggan would be forced to do) then to go further and infer from Reid's experiment (or any other) that this part of the appearance is actually double would be simply nonsense. If a part of an appearance is admittedly vague, then it is vague and that is the end of the matter. If it is double or even vaguely double, then that would be noticed, and by admission it is not. The article " On Seeing Double " also suggests that such a view as my own ascribes the implausible power of being able to double appearances to the mere act of attending to an object. A simple suggestion, however, shows that this is really not so extraordinary a power. The whole impact of Taylor and Duggan's article comes from the fact that their conclusions supposedly are about normal vision. If, on the other hand, they had attempted to prove that double vision occurs under special, abnormal conditions, then their conclusions would have been less significant, and considerably less shocking. Yet, in reality, this is all that they have succeeded in doing. If one could show that the conditions of Reid's experiment violated one of the conditions of normal vision, then he would thereby disqualify Reid's

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generalization. Although I now might attempt to give a complete account of " normal " vision (perhaps including requirements such as freedom from ophthalmic disease, certain minimal environmental light conditions, etc.), I think it would be readily admitted that freedom from excessive strain should be included in this account. Actually, there are many ways in which I can strain my vision, resulting in abnormal, doubled appearances. If I cross my eyes or push my eyeball with my finger, I begin to see double. Appearances are single and normal for me until precisely the time when I push my eyeball. Then suddenly, due to the strain, my images become double. Likewise, when I focus upon some object and yet attend to a finger which I have

obtruded into my line of vision, I introduce a strain on my eyes which results in double vision. In trying to look at one thing while attending to another, I am actually straining to see two things at once. This is quite difficult when both things are in the line of vision. The effect is as if I had crossed my eyes or pushed my eyeball with my finger. To prove to yourself that there is this strain, merely attempt Reid's experiment. Of course, there is no such strain in normal vision and there is, therefore, no reason to suppose that it too is double vision.

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