On Things Not Being What They Appear

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O. R. Jones, in his article 'The Way Things Look and the Way Things Are'[1] criticizes McGinn for asserting that many physical objects which appear solid to the naked eye are shown by science not to be so, thus not *being* the way they *appear*. Jones's argument is, in essence, that since the way objects appear to the naked eye is consistent with both a continuous and a granular microstructure, they cannot 'appear' one thing rather than the other (just as a pond cannot *appear* to the naked eye either to contain or not to contain microscopic life).

I am not concerned here so much with whether McGinn is mistaken as with the nature of Jones's argument, and its relation to a Wittgensteinian point from which I believe Jones (amongst other people) has drawn too simple a moral. In fact, I am inclined to agree with Jones that the appearance of physical objects suggests no theory of their microstructure at all. The trouble is that Jones's argument seems to demonstrate far too much, for it is difficult to see how, on his account, appearances could ever be misleading at all. And it is well known to common sense that they often are.

Jones appeals to the remark of Wittgenstein's when it was suggested to him that it *looks* as though the sun goes round the earth: 'Well, what would it have looked like if it had looked as if the earth were rotating?'[2] Let me suggest an analogous (if deliberately outlandish) case. Some Indian mystics are apparently capable of slowing down their heart-rate at will, in such a way as to simulate death. When in this state, does such a person *appear* to be dead, or not? Most of us would say that he does. Let us suppose further that this person is brought to England to undergo a surgical operation. Looking for a suitably peaceful place to practise his art, he wanders into the hospital mortuary and lies down on a slab. We will add, for good measure, that while he is in this position someone accidentally spills a blood sample over part of his body, which dries on him in just the way that blood would do if emitted by a fatal wound. Now if he is subsequently treated as a corpse and dies as a result, the person responsible (or his barrister) may well say 'Well, he certainly appeared to be dead'; and most of us would accept this as accurate. What does the good Wittgensteinian reply if the prosecuting lawyer says 'Maybe, but how would he appear if he appeared as though he were a mystic in a trance on a mortuary slab with a blood sample spilled over him?' The defence may not be a knock-down one (since we expect very rigorous checks to have been made before a person is regarded as dead). But does it have no force at all, on account of the latter explanation being just as consistent with the appearance as the hypothesis of his being dead? On the contrary, it is a perfectly intelligible explanation of the error. What, then, has gone

[1] *Mind*, 1985, pp. 108–10.

[2] Jones cites the remark as related in a play by Stoppard. My only knowledge of it is as in the incident recounted by G. E. M. Anscombe (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London, Hutchinson, 1959, p. 151) where the interlocuter is Miss Anscombe herself, and the remark is worded slightly differently.

wrong? For a start, it would seem that mere *consistency* is not enough. That is, we do not seem to be justified in asserting the following proposition, which I will call the Consistency Theory, or C:

> 'It *appears* that p' is true if and only if a state of affairs S obtains, and S is evidence for an hypothesis p, and the proposition that S obtains is inconsistent with any possible rival to p.

The Wittgensteinian point is *not* that neither of two states of affairs consistent with a proposition p can ever count as a case of 'appearing that' p. Rather, it is that there may be no such thing as *the* way things appear, but that this latter depends on all kinds of background assumptions (perhaps connected with a 'form of life', or at least with certain habitual ways of understanding and describing things). In other words, that there is no 'brute look of things' unconnected with some such framework or other.

'But surely', one is tempted to reply, 'there *is* a perfectly good sense in which things have a "brute look"—that in which one thing may look *exactly like* another without qualification. My hand in front of me looks *exactly like* my hand, in just this "brute" sense.' At this point, we need to appeal to a distinction first (to my knowledge) made by Austin,[3] between an evidential and a non-evidential sense in which a thing may appear one way rather than another. This is clearest in the case of 'looks'. To say 'He looks like his father' is not to evince evidence for the proposition that he *is* his father, whereas to say 'He looks like a gentleman' may be to evince evidence that he is a gentleman. The same, however, is true of 'appears'. There is a difference between something's appearing *as though it were* X, and its appearing *to be* X.

Now there is indeed a 'brute' sense connected with the former use of 'looks like'—that of looking (or appearing, if we do not want to limit ourselves to the visual case) *exactly* like; but there is no such 'brute' sense connected with the evidential use, because there is no such thing as looking (appearing) *exactly as if* something is the case. For all sorts of appearances may be consistent with a particular state of affairs. There is, for example, something about a coin lying flat on a table which looks like an ellipse—*exactly* like an ellipse. But 'How would it look if it looked as though it were circular but lying flat?' has no force unless there is some pressure on us to think that the ellipticality (whatever it is) constitutes evidence for the proposition that the object we are looking at is in fact elliptical. In the same way, the table may look exactly as it would in a world in which matter was continuous and not granular, without this fact providing the slightest evidence for its being so. The reason why the man on the slab looks not just *exactly as though he were* dead (i.e. just as he would look if he were in fact dead), but looks *to be* dead (i.e. looks as though he is dead) does not lie in a greater degree of exactness, but in the connection between the state of affairs and certain standard criteria of death. And there are no such standard criteria for determining the microstructure of matter, or deciding between alternative cosmologies.

This is why it is possible both to agree with Jones that physical objects in general do not appear solid (for what structures things appear to have may well be underdetermined by the mere look of them), and yet not be committed to accepting

[3] J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, Ch. IV.

C. In fact, if we assume that there is *always* some rival hypothesis consistent with the appearances (an hallucination, a Cartesian demon), to accept C would be to deny in effect that there is ever such a thing as the way things appear.

But there *is* such a thing as the way things appear, and it may indeed be different from the way things *are*. This is part of the reason for distinguishing between the two. Yet the way a thing appears is not a monadic feature of *it*, but is always the way it appears *to us*, and talking about this means involving ourselves with the whole apparatus of expectations and assumptions which forms the backcloth against which things have the appearances which they do. It is not in this sense of 'appearance' in which the 'brute facts' of experience are to be sought in appearances.

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[Footnotes]

[1] **The Way Things Look and the Way Things Are**
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