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THE PROBLEM OF VISUAL SPACE

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A LARGE number of philosophical writers are troubled over the visual appearance of certain objects. Locke tried to get away from the difficulty by dividing properties into primary and secondary. The primary are, roughly, those that have to do with quantity, the secondary with qualities. The primary he conceded to be extramentally real, the secondary he took to be entirely mental. Philosophical scientists immediately pounced upon the primary properties as the only ones they need bother about; here they had mass, motion, extent,—everything required for measuring and numbering,—and with these they were content.

It now develops that even primaries have their difficulties. In this brief article I wish to speak of spacial properties only, and discuss them from the standpoint of vision. By visual space we do not understand space as a receptacle, but simply as extension; nor do we understand extension in the abstract, but in the concrete. Space thus understood is a primary property. Our subject, therefore, is sight perception of extended bodies.

The first difficulty is presented by objects seen in a mirror. They are not where we see them. Professor Whitehead calls these objects "delusive." Passing over this

strange choice of a name, we need only remark that the professor, in common with many others, seems to consider distance an essential and primal datum of vision; whereas it is quite patent that the impression of distance is acquired. It is beyond dispute that infants, as well as adults, cured of congenital blindness, do not know in the first moments of vision which objects are nearer, which farther away. In fact, an infant can hardly know near and far at all. Without going deeply into the origin of our perception of distance, it is safe to say that we get our first impression of it by moving,—both by moving the limbs and by moving about among objects. Once the notion of distance is obtained, we learn to gauge the shorter distances from muscular sensations caused by converging and focusing the eyes upon an object. For greater distances other factors must enter.

Sight of itself reports relative size. Without the aid of any other sense a toy balloon looks larger when blown up, and smaller when the air is allowed to escape. But the same impression can be produced by simply moving the balloon toward or away from the eyes. The child cannot tell whether the balloon is being moved until it learns that objects look dimmer as the distance increases. Thus relative size plus relative clarity are, for remote objects, the factors which give through sight the impression of distance.