

## The Nature of Sense Data

Describing what the nature of the immediate object of awareness is becomes the next task for the philosopher after realizing it is (arguably) never the object in the material world. Of the two theories proposed, the Sense Datum theory and the Adverbial theory, the former tends to be the most widely recognized and easiest to understand. The sense datum theory claims that the objects of our immediate awareness have certain properties. These six properties serve as a starting point in understanding what it is we can actually experience.

The first property of sense data (that which is immediately experienced in this theory) is that they actually possess the qualities which the viewer (or experiencer) perceives them to have. That is to say that if an experience has a quality of blueness, the sense data must also have the quality of blueness. This is similarly the case for any quality one can assign to an experience, such as color, temperature, size or shape.

The second property of sense data is that they have a property of dimension. Actually, this property is more of a question than a definite property, as it is debated whether sense data two dimension or three dimensional in nature – flat or extended. It would at first seem that they are two dimensional, as of a painting presented to the mind, though some philosophers have argued strongly for the alternative.

The third property of sense data are that they are distinct from external material objects, and that they are also distinct from processes within the brain. The reason for this property is that neither the brain processes nor object in the world have all of the properties that sense data have according to the first property. This of course leaves one with the strange and uneasy question of where sense data really reside. Some philosophers have speculated that they exist only in association with the brain, existing as a relation between the material world and the mind.

Fourth, sense data have the property of being momentary entities; they exist only in the present having no extension through time. The main reason for this property is the fact that they are defined as having the properties that are experienced, which of course can change from moment to moment. While this fact doesn't quite prove that sense data exist only momentarily, the fact they do change qualities quite often (some would argue constantly) gives strong evidence for the conclusion.

The fifth property of sense data is that there are some number of sense data being experienced at any one time. Like the second property, this one is also more of a question than a property – what is the number of sense data being experienced exactly? Is there only one sense datum for all of the sensual field (visual, aural, etc.)? Are there a finite number of sense data, one for each apparent object we care to make a distinction for? Are there some countable or uncountable infinite number of them, as we make smaller and smaller distinctions? In fact, it seems that philosophers have little concerned themselves with this question, determining that any of the answers will result in generally the same conclusion regarding the theory as a whole.

The sixth property, like so many others, is actually a question about the properties of sense data rather than a definite quality. Actually, the sixth property concerns two separate but related questions: can sense data be experienced by more than one person, and do they exist when not being immediately experienced? It would seem that the latter question might be given some insight considering that sense data are thought of as momentary. However, it is not out of question that sense data, after being experienced immediately, don't somehow “transfer” to the realm of things that can be experienced through a medium, like memory. Evidence for the former question, whether two people can immediately experience the same sense datum, seems to indicate that this never happens. However, there is no conclusive proof for this and it is still an open question.

Sense data seem to be difficult and very little understood sorts of objects. Nevertheless, the need to understand the nature of what an observer is immediately experiencing is great. Understanding what is really experienced is crucial in

understanding the nature of the world in which we live. These six properties (ahem, questions) are at least a start in that endeavor.