On the Self-Subsistent Nature of Perceptibles

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hilosophers such as John Locke, George Berkeley, and Imannuel Kant have traditionally treated subjectivelyapprehended perceptible phenomena (hereafter referred to as perceptibles) as being inherently dependent on external conditions being met. These philosophers grant no independent existence to said perceptibles: when the conditions for their existence are no longer met, the phenomena are said to cease to exist. The view manifests itself in multiple variations. The multiple theories of perception hold in common the doctrine that perceptibles are dependent on either minds or external objects and sometimes on the relation between these two, and the doctrine that perceptibles do not have an independent existence of their own. I shall explain what I mean by perceptibles and offer an argument in defense of the independent existence of perceptibles. In the end I will briefly argue why the various opposing theories of perception are wrong. In the process of the paper I shall provide reasons that will ultimately help me to that effect.

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Harold Langsam, in "The Theory of Appearing Defended," lists several common theories of perception, almost all of which appear to present perceptibles as dependent entities. Langsam himself offers a defense for one such theory, the "Theory of Appearing" (36). Langsam defines the theory of appearing as the claim that "experiences are relations between material objects and minds" (33). Langsam also lists other alternative theories. One of these theories (the causal theory of perception) claims that "the relation in question is a certain kind of causal relation" (36). As Langsam explains it, "to say that the apple appears red to me is to say that the apple causally acts on me in a certain way to produce in me a certain kind of experiential state, an experiential state in which the phenomenal feature of redness is instantiated" (36-37). Another family of theories described by Langsam makes perceptibles into properties of things. Langsam lists three such theories: the sense-data theory, or "the view that phenomenal features are intrinsic properties of mental objects" (35-36); naive realism, or "the view that they are intrinsic properties of material objects" (36); and a third view, "the view that they are intrinsic properties of brain states" (36). This last view may be interpreted as signifying panpsychism/hylozoism, or some form of emergentism, or else a sort of epiphenomenalism, but Langsam spends no further time clarifying what he means by it. Langsam commits himself to defending the theory of appearing in his paper. I shall argue against these theories in brief, in the latter part of my paper.

First I think it expedient to clarify the meaning of the term perceptible. A perceptible is, roughly speaking, also a perception; yet it is only a perception in one sense of the word. The term "perception" may be variously used to mean both a verb ("to perceive") and a non-verb object, and when it is used to mean a non-verb object, it is specifically a species of object which always finds itself the object of the aforementioned verb. That is, "perception" may be a verb, or it may be the object of the verb perception; in the latter case, perception (the verb) has for its object perceptions (the objects). Such use of a word with dual meanings will inevitably invite confusion. For this reason I reserve the use of the new term perceptible for the second sense of the word "perception," as it is a term which indicates somewhat naturally "that which is perceivable," firmly framing it as

an object of perception without inviting further confusion. I think that the ambiguity of the term "perception" may play some role in the conception of perceptibles as wholly-dependent entities.

The limits of expression faced by *common* (regularly-spoken, non-technical) language also seem to strengthen the conception of perceptibles as wholly-dependent entities. By this I mean that in common language, what are presented as "objects of perception" are not perceptibles *themselves*, but other things, which are generally accepted to be entirely different things from the perceptibles themselves. This aspect of common language is sometimes employed strategically to deny the objecthood of perceptibles by those who wish to treat perceptibles as dependent entities. It is common language to say that *I see an apple*; it is not as natural to say that *I see the phenomenal redness* of that apple. Yet I think that this less-regular manner of speaking is still entirely proper, and does not betray natural language and its conceptual limits. Indeed, I think it reveals the true objecthood of such things as phenomenal redness.

The structure of language reveals, I think, the true objecthood of perceptibles. Bertrand Russell in *Principles of Mathematics* touched upon the structure of language in ways indicative of this, though he himself did not specify therein a conclusion akin to mine. I think he was wise to note that "the study of grammar ... is capable of throwing far more philosophical light on philosophical questions than is commonly supposed by philosophers" (42). My argument that perceptibles bear true objecthood shall very much be a *grammatical* one.

We shall begin, as Russell does, by dividing up elements of language by kind. Some words are verbs; some are adjectives; some are nouns. Of verbs, some are transitive: that is, they can bear objects. Other verbs are intransitive, and thus lack objects. Thus in the sentence "I ate an apple," the verb "to eat" is transitive, because it has as its object an apple, while in the sentence "I ran today," the verb "to run" is intransitive, because it has no object in the sentence. Transitivity and intransitivity can be understood as artifacts of sentences (thus, it is conceivable that two sentences may describe the same states of affairs and yet use transitive and intransitive verbs respectively). I think it is also possible to additionally view transitivity and intransitivity in a different way: as aspects of the actions or relations present in said states of affairs themselves. In

this second sense, transitivity and intransitivity would be aspects of actual or instantiated particular actions/relations in the real world. If a real action bears a subject but not an object, it is intransitive, while if it does bear an object, it is transitive. This is, I think, not of small importance: as an example, my action of eating in a state of affairs where I am eating an apple is absolutely not intransitive, because the action has an object; nevertheless I may describe my eating in a sentence where it appears as an intransitive verb (i.e., "I am eating," that is, by omitting mention of the apple). Adjectives in turn, seem to me to parallel properties, as found outside the limits of mere sentences and in actual states of affairs; even as properties may be extrinsic or intrinsic, and if extrinsic seemingly relational, so too do I think that a fuller understanding of adjectives cannot be had without a clear understanding of properties. Nouns, last of all, are subjects and objects in sentences. Russell distinguished two kinds of nouns, or substantives as he called them. Some substantives, he said, "are derived from adjectives or verbs, as humanity from human, or sequence from follows" (42). Russell made it clear that he was not speaking of an etymological derivation but of a logical one (42). In contrast to these, Russell claimed that other nouns "are not derivative, but appear primarily as substantives" (42).

The distinction between nouns which appear primarily as nouns and nouns which are merely logically derived from verbs and adjectives is, I think, of utmost importance in making the argument that perceptibles are independent entities with true objecthood. What I wish to argue is that perceptibles are not merely logically derived from verbs or adjectives, but are in reality primarily nouns, and therefore, objects. When a verb appears as an object in a sentence, it is called a gerund. Thus "I like jumping" has for its object jumping, which is a gerund form of the verb "to jump." In situations like these, a gerund is an object to a transitive verb (such as "to like"). The gerund is, outside sentence structures (that is, in the world as it is), some sort of abstraction signifying a relation or action, such as jumping. It is not what philosophers at times term an object in a qualified sense of that term. While an "object" in grammar may be a gerund or something such as that, in this qualified sense an "object" cannot be a gerund. It is this sense of "object" that I think Russell is grasping at, when he speaks of his non-derivative,

primary substantives. It is also this sense of "object" that I think is commonly denied to perceptibles. In grammar, an "object" is any noun participating in a sentence relation with some subject; in a qualified philosophical sense, a more metaphysical sense, an "object" may be a non-derivative, primary substantive, not a gerund or otherwise. At first glance terms like "apple" or "table" seem to be objects in this sense, since they do not appear to be gerunds like "running" or "liking."

There cannot be controversy that perceptibles are objects at least in a grammatical sense. This does not prove that they are not gerunds, which requires further reasoning. Yet it cannot be held in doubt that perceptibles are objects in a grammatical sense, much like how even gerunds can be. This must be the sense in which Kant says that appearances are "undetermined object[s] of an empirical intuition" (Kant 65) and the sense meant by Locke when he says that ideas are "immediate object[s] of perception" (Pojman 651). For in spite of the dependent nature of appearances for Kant and ideas for Locke, it appears that these may in at least one sense be termed objects nonetheless, and this sense is, I think, the grammatical one. The very evidence that perceptibles are grammatical objects is found when language permits us to structure sentences where perceptibles are objects to other verbs. For example, if redness or bitterness are to be considered as exemplary perceptibles, language does not forbid us from speaking of redness or bitterness as objects when it permits us to craft such sentences as "I hate bitterness" or "I love redness." This is all the evidence needed, since by definition, something which is a recipient of a verb is an object, and that is the role played by perceptibles in situations such as these.

The question to be answered is whether perceptibles are logically derived from verbs, since it seems clear that gerunds are not objects in the qualified sense. But I do not say that grammatical objects logically derived from adjectives are not objects in the qualified sense yet; this is because I think that adjectives may be abbreviations for combinations of objects and certain transitive relations. In this case, an object is not logically derived from an adjective so much as an adjective is logically derived from an object. First it must be determined whether perceptibles are logically derived from verbs, as gerunds. It is true that given any noun, a verb may be etymologically

derived from it by artifice. For example, a certain fellow named John may act so distinctively that his peers may say of their other friend Jack, that if he walked into the park in a certain manner, he "Johned" into the park. In this case, "to John" is a true verb, and like any verb may be supposed to be logically transformable into a gerund form. If anyone should say that John, the living human being himself, is the gerund of "to John," he would be mistaken. Even if the gerund form were to be named "John," it would not mean the living human being named John. The reason for this is simple: when speaking of the gerund of "to John" (i.e. "Johning"), it is perfectly possible to mean said gerund, and not mean, in any way, John himself. The reverse holds true. Thus since either the gerund or the boy may be semantic objects in sentences, the differentiation between the two will be most evident when either is put in place of the other in any given sentence. "I like John" and "I like Johning" simply do not mean the same thing.

It is possible to argue, I imagine, that a verb exists which expresses the relation between a mind and an external object such as an apple, such that the meaning of said verb is the seeing-of-the-phenomenon or something like that. It is not merely the seeing, separated from the perceptible or perceptibles, as we are often fit to do; it is supposedly a unity of the two into a single indivisible relation or verb. To then speak of the perceptible is not to actually divide this indivisible unity, since it cannot be done; rather, it is to produce a mere gerund form of the verb. Thus "redness" is the gerund of "to red-see" or some such hypothetical verb (e.g., "I red-saw the apple" would then mean that I entered a simple relation with the apple of a subjective nature, and that it had the phenomenal nature of seeing-redness). The shortcomings of natural language are (supposedly) not to be viewed as conclusive proof that such hypothetical relational unity does not exist. Said simple relation, if real, would exist between the mind and the apple, and in gerund form be expressed as "redness." for example.

I do not think this argument works. First, I do not think there is good reason to believe in the simplicity of such a proposed verb. What reason will we give against any argument that "slam-the-door" or some such fancy composite is a simple verb? Nothing further, I think, than the mere evidence that we do, in fact, *analyze* such a verb

to simpler components: in the case of "slam-the-door," the verb "to slam" and the object "door" are simpler than "slam-the-door," and are what make up said verb. "Slam-the-door" may be an intransitive verb; the fact that it may be hard to think of "slam-the-door" as a transitive verb should not be seen as evidence that it is not a verb, and if anything it may reveal something about the nature of intransitive verbs. Are intransitive verbs ultimately reducible to simpler transitive verbs and objects, for example? I think it possible that they are at least *transformable* into combinations of transitive verbs and objects, and whether this should be viewed as a *most-reduced state* is worth further consideration.

Returning to the question of whether "to red-see" is reducible or not, I think the mere fact that we do in fact distinguish seeing (unqualified) from redness is the only evidence we need, and proof positive, that mysterious so-called "simple" relations between minds and certain external objects (e.g. apples) of the sort discussed do not exist: the real relation in question between them is in fact a complex one, and one reducible to further objects and relations. "Redness" is not the gerund form of "to red-see" but an object of "to see," and together with "to see" can form the fanciful verb "to red-see." It is also evident, though on these very grounds, that "redseeing" as a gerund does not mean "redness." This is something which is obscured the moment one denies that "red-seeing" is a composite verb however, since once it is denied that some object "redness" exists (grammatically) separate from the verb "seeing," it is impossible to appeal to that fact to show that "redness" means something other than "red-seeing." Yet "door" and "slam-the-doorness" are very clearly different nouns with different meanings: it is in a similar way, I think, that perceptibles can be shown not to be gerunds.

The very fact that we can make perceptibles objects of verbs such as "to see," which are simpler than "to red-see," supports the idea that they are primarily substantives. It shows that they are not logically derived from verbs. There is no other way to turn perceptibles into verbs than the aforementioned effort, which attempts to pass a complex verb for a simple one of which the gerund form is perceptibles. Any other attempt will be clearly etymological rather than logical, and mimic the case of John and "Johning." If there are

successful attempts that do not commit the one mistake or the other, I do not know of them, and cannot even comprehend the possibility of them, nor do I think anyone can. As such I think it fit to move on to a brief discussion of adjectives and intransitive verbs.

It was noted that both adjectives and intransitive verbs may be convertible to combinations of transitive verbs and objects. For example, "The apple is red" may be transformed into "The apple has redness," and "Sarah walked" may be transformed to "Sarah transposed herself from location A to location B" or something of the sort. There is no doubt that such transformations are awkward, but they do seem permissible and reasonable. In the case of some intransitive verbs, ambiguity is found in the sentences, but outside the sentences (that is, in actual states of affairs in reality) there can be no ambiguity of the sort: Sarah does not meet the criteria of walking without transposing herself from location to location, for example. It appears then, that intransitive verbs may be converted into combinations of transitive relations and objects. If the object is a gerund for a complex verb, it may be further converted to eliminate complexity. Surely, this is, in principle something that would permit us to ultimately reduce the whole of language to combinations of only primary substantives (irreducible to transitive verbs) and transitive verbs, or transitive relations.

I propose that economy shall be our motivation for viewing reality as a combination of primary substantives and transitive verbs. Since all other artifacts of language may be converted into combinations of these two kinds of words, and since these two kinds of words do not convert into each other, I think that an honest analysis of language will show that reality is ultimately made of nothing more than this: this is most economical. I am not denying that adjectives or intransitive verbs have *being*, but only noting that they are ultimately *abbreviations* as it were, for combinations of primary substantives and transitive relations. Presumably, things that appear to be primary substantives and transitive relations may falsely so appear, being in reality complex; thus, I mean that everything is ultimately made of combinations of *simple* primary substantives and *simple* transitive relations.

Russell's analysis of language may thus be modified. For Russell, there are primary substantives (logically-derived substantives

being derived from verbs and adjectives) and adjectives/verbs. Yet all I admit of are primary substantives and transitive verbs, since all else may be converted to combinations of these, and the two are not convertible into one another. Where does this leave perceptibles? Any argument that "redness" or "bitterness" are but noun-forms of adjectives and therefore not possessing true (metaphysical) objecthood is as good as any argument that claims that "metal" or "wood" are unreal when "metallic" and "wooden" are their adjective forms. We say that a metallic or wooden object contains in it actual metal or wood, without denying the real primary substantive (or metaphysically objective) nature of these things themselves. Why should we not treat perceptibles in the same way? Yet it is too soon to say that the external apple is made up of tropes of redness, sweetness, and so forth. At the least, the phenomenal apple (the image and the likeness which we perceive) is in fact composed of redness, sweetness, etc. At least, it seems this is the case.

We shall say that perceptibles are true objects in the qualified metaphysical sense if it is proven that they are not gerund forms of transitive verbs. It seems to me that they are not, since arguments that they are make the mistake of either confusing etymological derivation for logical derivation (as when confusing John for Johning) or claiming simplicity where complexity is self-evident (as when claiming that red-seeing is a simple rather than a complex verb, whose gerund form is redness). On this ground, I conclude that perceptibles are truly primarily substantive entities.

It is not natural to say that primary substantives emerge into being from previous non-existence (except as wholes from synthesized parts, or as parts from analyzed wholes) the very moment that they appear in grammar as objects to some other verb. What I mean by this is that we do not say that if Rachel kicked a ball, her kicking brought the ball into existence. Thus, it would be odd, if redness is a primary substantive, to say that "I see red" brings redness into being by contingency upon the seeing action, such that in the absence of seeing, or in the absence of an "I" to see at all, the redness ceases to exist. Thus the *esse est percipi* doctrine of Berkeley seems unjustified in the end. Theological proponents of *ex nihilo* creation and *ad nihilum* destruction aside, there are no examples in language where we say that an object comes into being the moment it is an object to

some verb. The aforementioned proponents are furthermore crafting unique verbs which specifically bring objects into being by definition of the very verbs themselves. We would not say of kicking that it causes balls kicked to come into being, by any inherent nature of the verb itself; it is the same with all other verbs. Yet humankind has for a long time treated perception (the verb) as one of the only exceptions, and other exceptions are similarly subjective mental activities. Mankind often says that imagined thoughts and other such things are created as if from nothing; they take this for granted. But unlike the theological creation/destruction verbs, these are not defined beforehand by definition, and then applied descriptively to those things which the descriptions pick out from the world. Rather, our creation of these linguistic verbs, and the linguistic objects of those verbs themselves, is posterior to our actual experience of the metaphysical objects and the subjective relations we engage with them: they are but a "this" term which we apply to certain things that we encounter experientially. And as it turns out, all that the senses do show, is perceptibles going in and out of view. We, who have been trained from a young age to believe in the relative permanence of other objects, non-perceptible extended objects such as tables and chairs and beds, seem to immediately ignore our training when it pertains to perceptibles themselves, which thing is strange.

What reason can we give for the dependent nature of perceptibles either on the relation of perception or the subject perceiving (ourselves)? Nothing more, I think, than custom. It is fine to be skeptical that they continue to exist, but the degree of certainty expressed commonly is nothing more than an unproven dogma. Does perceiving different things at different times change our most underlying self? If it did, so as to utterly destroy our old self and replace it with a new self, with no substratum retained over the change, then the new self could not be our old "I". Sure it may have all the same memories as ourselves, but the old self would in reality be annihilated from even existing. It is one thing for the present self to have false memories of past existence, but another entirely for a present self to stop existing, being replaced by an entirely different mental subject, though a similar subject to ourselves in its retention of our memories, thoughts, and so forth. If, in any way at all, our sense of subjective point of view does endure the change, then this

cannot be unless a substratum of some sort endured. Then if change occurs over a substratum at least once, and all other change may be over a substratum or *ex nihilo/ad nihilum*, why assume any instance of the latter, when it is more economic to assume all instances of change are instances of the former in the absence of proof of any of the latter and the existence of at least *one* instance of the former?

I shall now answer the many theories listed by Langsam. Langsam's own theory of appearing appeals to a supposed common sense had by us all: he asks, "who would deny that for a subject to have an experience of an apple is for her to be related in some way to that apple?" (Langsam 33). He also demands that opponents provide an explanation for talk of appearance (36), such as "the apple appears red to me." This is easy to do. If by the apple is meant the external object, we mean that at least two relations, if not three, occur at once. The first relation, it is assumed, is one between the mind and the apple. The mind relates to the apple indirectly, through a longer process of intermediate relations: mind to brain, brain to nervous system, nervous system to sensory organs, sensory organs to sensory input, sensory input to corresponding object of physical sensation, e.g. the apple. We are not going to make a jump and say that the relation of mind to brain in this situation is a simple relation whose gerund form is redness or something like that. As a result, the relation of mind to brain spoken of here is something not involving any sort of perception, whatsoever. At the same time as this relation of mind to apple (via brain, etc) is taking place, a different relation is taking place, one of mind to redness, mind to sweetness, etc: that is, a relation of mind, to the phenomenal image and likeness of an apple. This is the subjective "apple" we see, taste, feel, and so forth, as opposed to the physical apple which physicists assure us is inherently colorless, tasteless, and so on, though it is an extended mass of particles arranged in some order. There may be a third relation between the subjective "apple" and the physical apple other than an indirect relation that has the mind as an intermediary; but whether this is so, is unknown, and largely unimportant as well. The indirect relation is one of correlation: the physical apple correlates with the image and likeness of a phenomenal "apple." We name this correlative relation "appearance." Economy may even deny existence to the so-called physical apple. The apple as a physical mass

of extended particles becomes but a useful fiction if that is the case. Nevertheless its existence or non-existence has no great impact on our view of perceptibles themselves. Furthermore, I think there are good inductive reasons for belief in physical reality after all. Rather, I think that the Kantian approach is flawed, which presupposes something of which the appearance is an appearance of, in order to have any recourse for talk of appearances at all, in any reasonable sense (Kant 27). Thus we do away with any need for noumena. Talk of "appearance" in Langsam's sense is an artifact of our belief in the existence of physical reality, rather than the proof of its existence. It is the same with Kant. Nor does talk of appearance, even if a physical reality exists, entail that there be a single relation between minds and physical reality, whose gerund form is perceptibles or something of that sort. The two-relation view I have shared offers a feasible model for reality, without entertaining absurdities such as treating perceptibles as anything less than primary substantives.

The causal theory of perception bears close resemblance to Locke's system and appears to be one of the most popular theories of perception today. This is the view, as expressed by Locke, that "when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions" (Poiman 644). Locke and his followers also offer a distinction between primary and secondary types of perceptibles. The former (Locke calls them "primary ideas") actually "resemble" qualities in the physical objects that produce them in our minds causally. The latter ("secondary ideas") do not, and thus their essence is mysterious, as it vanishes when not entertained by our perception, having no independent existence otherwise (McCann 63). Locke counts among the former extension, solidity, shape, motion, and among the latter color, flavor, scent, and so forth (60). But even as Berkelev notes, if the reason for differentiating these is that the former kinds are supposedly the same independent of our conditions of perception, while the latter fluctuate as conditions supposedly change, the reality is that both fluctuate, since an object will appear larger to a mite than it does to us (Berkeley 75–76), and even to us it appears smaller or larger depending on our distance from it. "Can one and the same thing be at the same time in itself of different dimensions?" (76). The Lockean variety of the theory is thus rather easy to criticize, since

there appears to be little reason to say anything about the external world and its nature like he claims. A more consistent version of Lockeanism would bear resemblance to Kantianism perhaps. The main reason I would dismiss a causal theory of perception once the problems with Lockeanism are fixed is that it makes claims it cannot verify. It cannot be shown that anything is created from nothing. Indeed, it may be more reasonable to believe all change is across an underlying substratum, and thus all change is change in external relations between unchanging primary substantives. If this is more economic, then better reasons must be provided for believing in causal creation *ex nihilo* than any so far given.

Naive realism's main problem is that it seems to treat external objects as bearing unchanging qualities while yet placing our perceptions of these same objects (which clearly differ) either in the external objects or in the minds or in the relations between them. If it is the relations, then this is a theory of appearing: indeed Langsam himself makes this very assertion (Langsam 53–56). If the qualities are in these objects, then an object may be big and small at once, or pinkish and white at once, in ways that it cannot be without creating logical contradictions. This is Berkeley's argument against extension being a property of external objects, and it applies just the same to naive realism. Then if the properties are internal, we have the causal theory of perception, and the same problems had with it return. Naive realism thus does not seem to be much of an obstacle.

The sense data theory as Langsam defines it may be conformable to our theory that perceptibles are independent metaphysical objects that self-subsist. Variants which deny this would be like Berkeley's idealism, if they otherwise deny the existence of a physical world. Yet Berkeleyan skepticism may be ultimately defeated through an argument that *ex nihilo* creation and *ad nihilum* destruction is impossible, or at least that belief in them is unjustified, on economic grounds which favor change over substrata. Berkeley's main argument is that for perceptibles, their being is their being perceived. And yet, we do not say of a ball that to be a ball is to be kicked. If perception is an external relation to perceptibles, then their essence is not found in their being perceived. And this I think solves the problem with Berkeley. This leaves the brain states theory, which either is panpsychism/hylozoism, epiphenomenalism, or emergentism. The

latter two run into problems of creation *ex nihilo* while the former seems to argue for a sort of property dualism of perceptibles and brain matter, all the way down to subatomic particles. Perhaps of all the theories it is the least unreasonable. Yet if properties are all ultimately extrinsic, and reality is but made of simple primary substantives and simple transitive external relations, there may be no need to commit to a strict theory which describes all the smallest physical particles as bearing a mental component. Simply put, the two-relations theory permits for there to be times when assembled physical states connect to a mind which in turn connects to perceptibles, and times when neither assembled physical states nor perceptibles connect to a mind. This allows certain inanimate physical objects to be entirely nonmental, and allows for minds to be tethered to functioning brains but not to decayed brain matter.

Ultimately, I think this is the most favorable view. Our world may consist of a physical reality of extended particles in various combinations, as scientific theories say, but not in the least does it lack real, independent, self-subsistent perceptibles, which presumably are simplifiable to small quantized bits. These quantized bits may arrange and rearrange themselves as they will, and the complexes then may become perceived by minds by entering into relations of perception with the minds as subjects and themselves as objects. This they regularly do in correlation to certain relations of mind to physical matter. They do not always do it in the regular way, or at all, allowing us to explain hallucinations as well: the same redness and bitterness is found in a hallucination as in normal experience, but the correlation to physical states regularly had in normal experience is missing in a hallucination.

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