Reason
Gilbert Ryle

Everyone regards the old saying ‘Man is a rational animal’ as a platitude. What I want to talk about is what we have in mind when we say that men have Reason while animals don’t have it. Of course the word ‘Reason’ is a little old-fashioned now. We don’t use it much in ordinary conversation. True we may say that a lunatic has lost his reason, or that a child has reached the age of reason. But we do not nowadays say that Reason is very strong in Sherlock Holmes or very weak in Dr. Watson.

But of course we do talk about ‘reasoning powers’, and we should be quite happy to say that Sherlock Holmes’ reasoning powers were much superior to those of Dr. Watson. We should be quite happy, too, to say that mathematics or Latin grammar or philosophy is a good thing to have in a curriculum in school or university, because it strengthens people’s powers of reasoning, or, as we also put it, because it makes people think more logically. (I’m not myself saying that they do or don’t have this effect.)

Now when we say that Men have Reason and animals don’t, or that a lunatic has lost his reason and an idiot has never had it, do we mean simply that men have the power of reasoning, while animals don’t have it; that the lunatic has ceased to be logical and the idiot never began to be so?

I think if we face this question we shall say, ‘No, this isn’t by any means all that we mean. It is a part of what we mean, and very likely it is an important part of what we mean, but it is nothing like the whole of what we mean.’

Consider what we have in mind when we say that someone behaved unreasonably or that someone else is a very reasonable person, that such and such is the most reasonable line of action. Here we certainly should not be ready to substitute ‘logical’ for ‘reasonable’. (Only rarely and in special cases are we ready to describe actions as logical at all, namely where we think that the decision to take the action itself either sprang from a proper consideration

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of arguments or coincided with the action which would have done so.)
Ordinarily, we use ‘reasonable’ as roughly equivalent to ‘sensible’ or
‘judicious’; and in this sense we should be quite ready to say that though
Sherlock Holmes was more logical than Dr. Watson, Dr. Watson behaved
more sensibly or reasonably than Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, we might quite
well say, as Aristotle pointed out, a lunatic reasoned with flawless logic from
premises which no reasonable man would think for a moment of accepting.
The lunatic’s power of reasoning may be strong, without his being in any
degree a reasonable man.

What sorts of things have we in mind when we say that one person is more
reasonable or sensible than another, even though it is the second person who
has the superior powers of reasoning? What is the former person better at
than the second, granting that he is slower at seeing what consequences
follow from the data, more liable to miss subtle points of deduction, wears
sooner, and enjoys ratiocination less?

Well, first of all, clearly though he need not be much good at reasoning, he
can’t be no good at all. He must be open to ordinary persuasions; ready to
change his mind if new evidence is adduced, capable in some degree of
distinguishing what is relevant from what is irrelevant to a problem, and so
on. If he were quite idiotic or else completely harum-scarum in simple
arguments of an everyday kind, in everyday matters with familiar
terminology, we should not be inclined to call him reasonable or sensible. Or
to put it the other way round, given that A is more logical than B, in respect
of what sorts of deficiencies would we say that none the less A was more
unreasonable or silly than B?

On the way to suggest my answer to this question, I want to make what looks
like a detour. I want to describe a prejudice or family of prejudices which
vitiate people’s judgements on the issue.

The Greeks were the effective inventors of Science, of Philosophy, of History
— in a word of Theory. They found out how to theorise, and we can theorise
because they taught us. Proud of their discovery, it was natural that they
should raise two questions:

1. What is the salient difference between Greeks and barbarians?
2. What is the salient difference between men and animals?

And it was natural too that they should answer both in the same way. Men
differ from animals because they, unlike animals, can theorise; and Greeks — particularly the Greek elite — differ from barbarians, because they can theorise in an organised way. Animals are irrational, barbarians are sub-rational.

What is Theorising (thinking)? Now theorising, thinking or reasoning has something important to do with talking. A person who cannot talk cannot talk to himself or to others. If he can neither construct nor follow propositions, he cannot theorise. But theorising is not just spouting words — a parrot, a child chanting a nursery rhyme, a lunatic, spout words, but they are not thinking. Theorising is talking sense, talking with coherence, inventiveness, order, direction and so on: it is talking subject to certain rules or canons — such as the rules of logic which Aristotle was the first to begin to formulate. (But these are not the only rules to be observed.) To say that men are rational meant therefore that men could perform, what animals and idiots could not perform, a particular sort of task, namely the regulated production of assemblages of propositions, the construction and marshalling of propositions.

From this point of saying that the one thing which made Greeks superior to barbarians, and men to animals, was their capacity to construct systems of propositions, it was a short step to saying that there exists in each individual person a special faculty the standard exercise of which consists in the production of propositions. Men have Intellects or Rational Faculties, and having an Intellect or a Rational Faculty consists in the first instance in being able and prone to operate with propositions. If anything in man is immortal, it is, according to Aristotle, that part of us which has the special job of theorising. Hence arose the doctrine, still current, that the mind or soul of a man consists of three departments, of which the management-department is that which does all the thinking, knowing, inferring and so on. ‘Reason’ is the name for the department which performs the various tasks of cognition (it is also given the tasks of supervising the other departments). So we call people reasonable if either they are good at theory, i.e. are logical, or they behave in a self-controlled way — and our trouble is that being good at theory does not involve being good at self-control. Handling propositions seems to be a partly technical accomplishment, for which one needs to be naturally sharp-witted and well-schooled. But conducting one’s life and affairs in a prudent and self-controlled way seems to require quite other gifts and quite other training. Imprudence is not at all the same quality as the tendency to commit fallacies in argument; and the man we go to for sensible advice might be a very indifferent performer at mathematics, detection, philosophy.
But you will ask, ‘What is wrong with this? Surely this is roughly what everyone knows about the mind. True, there is the awkwardness that we ought to equate the reasonable man with the logical man, and we don’t quite like doing this; but surely this doesn’t throw doubt on the ordinary view of the nature and place of Reason?’ I believe this whole story to be a muddle. I’ll try to show what sort of muddle. I’m going to ask you to consider a fictitious story.

There exists a community in a remote Chinese valley which has developed its own civilisation. Some hundreds of years ago it was fortunate enough to invent the game of Bridge. All the best people play Bridge as well as they can and whenever they can; all the main school lessons are in Bridge or in other things like the arithmetic of permutations and combinations which are helpful to playing the game.

They have no special economic difficulties; nothing much is invented and no one wants anything to be invented, save better cards and card-tables. Their enthusiasms are to win games of Bridge and to join the equivalent of the Portland Club. They collect slaves in raids, but don’t teach them the cards. Their philosophers, such as they are, naturally define Man as a Bridge-playing animal; and a barbarian is a person who can hardly play cards at all.

Critics have pointed out that this definition is a bit narrow. (1) Even the Bridge-players sometimes play what we call ‘poker’, ‘chess’, and ‘snap’. But as these games are named ‘Nursery Bridge’, ‘Applied Bridge’, ‘Commercial Bridge’ and so on, the principle seems okay. (2) Even the Bridge-players have to look after their houses, gardens and families. But it has been found easy to say that these activities are simply Practical Bridge – paying the grocer is simply a special sort of Following Suit, and being kind to the children is simply a special sort of Supporting your Partner.

Their philosophers and psychologists have, of course, divided the Soul into three departments, the Bridge-playing department being supreme, and the only one with a worth and dignity of its own. It also renders hope of immortality; and the life after death will consist of endless and uninterrupted Contract Bridge.

Now you can all see what would be wrong in a theory of this sort. You would all say, ‘Oh but Bridge is only one parlour-game among others; the intellectual qualities exercised in it are exercised not only in other games but in other things that are not games.’ It’s true that animals can’t play Bridge and that Men can, but this is only one facet of the real differentia between
men and animals. You can’t erect one particular pastime into the Governing Principle in Man and the Universe.

Well and good. What you say about the activity of Bridge-playing, I am saying about the activity of organising propositions into theories. Just as you say, ‘Yes, man is a Bridge-playing animal, but he is a lot more besides – and indeed the fact that he can play Bridge is itself only a special exercise of something which he can and does exercise in lots of other ways as well’, so I say, ‘Yes, man is a ratiocinating animal, but he is a lot more besides – and indeed the fact that he can construct and appreciate valid arguments is itself only a special exercise of something which he can and does exercise in lots of other ways as well’. I hope you feel that my picture of the Chinese Bridge-playing community is a parallel – but I also hope you think that it is unfair.

So I must now make concessions. Bridge is one card game among many others, and obviously no one could seriously think that Bridge or any other card game was the proper activity of Man. Whereas thinking things out is not one game among others, and is not (with certain reservations and exceptions) a game at all, serious people have seriously thought that the proper business of Man is to theorise at least a lot; and every serious person must think that this is part of his proper business and a part upon which the rest of his proper business depends. If we were told of a person who could play poker, chess, cricket, solve crossword puzzles, but could not begin to learn Bridge we should think this surprising but perhaps not impossible. But if we were told of a person who could do business, play games, bring up children, serve on juries, but could not produce or follow propositions of concatenations of propositions, we should say, ‘Nonsense, there could not be such a man. A man may be pretty strong on other skills and pretty weak on this one, but he can’t be completely incompetent at this one while being at all competent at any of the others.’ But what sort of ‘couldn’t’ is this? What sort of absurdity is there in the idea of a person with no capacity whatsoever to produce or follow an argument (however simple or however familiar a thing and in however familiar language) who should yet be sensible and efficient in the conduct of affairs, the control of his own impulses and so on? Why must a reasonable person also be able to ratiocinate?

The official answer to this question would be that the reason why a person who could not theorise at all could not act sensibly is that behaving reasonably is a process which has as a past cause a process of ratiocination. Sensible conduct is doing things as an effect of having been persuaded to do them, and the persuasion was embodied in the premises and conclusions. To exert Practical Reason is to have been argued theoretically into deciding to do
the thing. How else could the Intellect get deeds performed in the outside world?

Now I'm going to be dogmatic here and simply say that this is not the connection at all. Good sense is inconsistent with total illogicality not because a valid ratiocinating process must precede any exercise of good sense as lightning must precede thunder, but for a quite different reason.

If you were told of a person who was really competent at arithmetic, but who could not get even a glimmering of algebra, or if you were told of someone who could speak and write correct and effective English, and criticise incorrect and ineffective English, but had absolutely no capacity to pick up a single idea of English grammar, you would be inclined to say, 'Nonsense, being a fair master of such and such methods entails being able to learn to consider ideas about these methods; or being good at operating according to such and such rules entails being able to learn to operate upon those rules. It is absurd to suppose that a person is sensible enough to manage his affairs, play chess, size up his acquaintances, judge distances, etc. and yet is too silly to learn to handle any propositions whatsoever about his affairs, his acquaintances, his chess-predicaments, etc.' Logicality is one kind of good sense or reasonableness; illogicality is one species of silliness; fallacies are one variety of mistakes. Theorising is one of the ways in which Man differs from animals – but not just in the way in which Bridge is one card game.

(1) Being logical is simply an extension of reasonableness to the special field of propositions (i.e. assertions, questions, orders and refusals). Of course a boy who can climb ladders, rocks, bannisters and scaffolding can learn to climb trees! (But this per se might be just, 'He can play poker and chess... So of course he could learn Bridge."

(2) But there is more to it than this. We think that any lesson learned in the sphere of conduct is a potential lesson learned in thinking. Learning how to tie knots is a lesson also in talking about knots – or a stage in that lesson. We have learned what is in fact the application of a verbal formula; though we may still have to learn that there is this formula which is applied to it.

I want to consider certain points which are common to the concepts of mistakes, blunders, failures, slips, shortcomings and, if you like, sins and wickednesses as well.

Philosophers have on the whole averted their eyes from most of the various
kinds of mistakes, but they have concentrated a lot of attention on two or three sorts. They have docketed several of the mistakes which people commit in reasoning, and called them ‘Fallacies’. They have wrung their hands over several kinds of errancy in conduct and called them ‘Sins’. They have rubbed their hands in triumph over certain kinds of observational-errors and called them ‘Illusions’ and ‘Delusions’. In the case of these last, the discredit for their occurrence is given not to us for making mistakes but to those mendacious informants, ‘the Senses’, for leading us astray.

But a moment’s reflection is enough to remind us that there are lots and lots of different kinds of mistakes. If I miscount the hens in the hen-house I have made a mistake but it need not be a fallacy, a sin or an illusion. It may be a piece of miscounting. If I misconstrue a sentence that I hear or read, again it is not a fallacy, a sin, an illusion or a piece of miscounting. It is a piece of misconstruing. If I tread on the accelerator instead of the brake, or lose my temper in an interview with a potential employer, or leave the way open for you to checkmate my King, again I am making mistakes or committing blunders, but they are mistakes of still different families. And a person who is prone to make mistakes of any one kind may very well be unlikely to make many mistakes of some, most or all of the other kinds.

Next, it is of great importance to notice that we never say that someone has made a mistake if he did not know what it was like to get it right. The ape tapping idly on the keys of the typewriter does not mis-spell ‘England’ even if what is on the paper is ‘Ingland’, for he is not spelling at all. He is not getting wrong something which he is trying to get right, for the phrase ‘try to get the spelling right’ is not applicable to apes. So even if the letters ‘England’ come out on the paper, we do not say that the ape has got it right or succeeded. For there had been no task. Taken in a certain way, it is a tautology to say of a person who makes a blunder or mistake that he knew better. Mistranslation is not within the powers of a person who cannot translate and to be accused of fallacy is to be credited with reason.

But more is proved than this. Where success is possible, failure is possible; and conversely where there is room for mistakes there is room for the avoidance and correction of mistakes: the sort of thing that can be got wrong is the sort of thing that can be got right and the sort of creature that can get things wrong is the sort of creature that can get them right. I am not here making the ordinary homiletic point that men are masters of their destiny and that what is their fault really is Their Fault. I am making a different sort of point, namely that what is mistaken as well as what is correct, failures as well as accomplishments, are performances having procedures. Misreasoning and
reasoning, miscounting and counting, misunderstanding and understanding are pairs of operations the performances of which entail the same learned technique. 'I can’t count, but I can miscount' would be an absurdity, where 'I can count but often I miscount' would be everyone’s confession.

Where it makes sense to say 'he blundered', it must be true to say 'his task was to do so and so'. What was unaccomplished or inefficiently accomplished could have been properly accomplished. The existence or possibility of mistakes proves that there exists at least one way of managing matters right. Further, not only does managing matters aright entail that no mistakes are made or left uncorrected, but the business of managing them aright involves taking precautions against making mistakes. The agent need not, and ordinarily would not, give separate considerations to each of the conceivable mistakes that he might be making. This would be the sort of over-insurance that leads straight to bankruptcy. But he will operate with such care and vigilance that he would (probably) notice if he were to commit a slip of any of the types known by experience to be likely to occur in this sort of job.

Sceptically minded philosophers love to say about theoretical operations (the only ones that they tend to interest themselves in) that we may always be wrong; there is nothing to exclude the risk of mistake. Arithmetic is not, in the long run, any better off than meteorology, since whatever anyone propounds in either subject might be his mistake. Let us consider this pessimistic generalisation: 'Whatever anyone ever propounds might be a mistake' (and let us consider how it applies to counting – 'however many chairs anyone counts in the room, there may really be a different number. For everyone can miscount.')</n1. The pessimistic generalisation might mean that 'Any operation which is of the sort to be correct-or-incorrect could (logically) be incorrect'. This is true but uninteresting and unpessimistic. ('The coin is heads or tails' is consistent with 'it is tails', which does not entail that no coins are ever heads.)

2. It might mean, 'In the execution of any operation of the sort to be correct-or-incorrect, you should take care not to make mistakes (since you will probably make them if you don't take care)'. This is good sense, but unpessimistic.

3. It might mean, 'In the execution of any operation of the sort to be correct-or-incorrect, don't hope by taking precautions to avoid mistakes, for you are bound to make mistakes whether or not you try to avoid
them. No precautions are any good.’ This is pessimistic and false. ‘The risk of mistakes is unavoidable’ is true; ‘Mistakes are unavoidable’ is false. It is one thing – and a true thing – to say that in order to get something right a technique is necessary; it is another thing – and a false one – to say that to get something right techniques are unavailing.

A few words more about precautions against mistakes. Suppose someone tells me by word of mouth his telephone number. Unless I am careful I shall either forget it completely or misremember it. What sort of carefulness do I exercise? Well, there are many particular steps that I can take. Writing the number down in an address-book is a very good precaution against losing or mistaking his number (for entries in address-books are not written in water, and address-books themselves are not often lost or destroyed). Or I may notice that his number is the square of the day of the month on which my birthday falls; or . . . etc. But the point is, these precautions are specific precautions against specific risks. I am not putting up barriers against Error; I am merely stopping the earths of this, that and the other particular error.

If I have to count the candles in a dining-hall furnished with many mirrors and a polished table, I take precautions against counting reflections as well as candles; and perhaps I may see fit to take precautions against squinting too (if I know that I sometimes squint). But I don’t take specific precautions against hypnotism, conjuring-tricks, lunacy, will-o’-the-wisps and so on. I don’t even think of these risks, and I should be very silly if I did. For these are not the sorts of things that happen before dinner-parties in College Common Rooms. (But of course they could happen – and if one of them did happen, I should perhaps have miscounted the candles. If we say, ‘There is always another risk to be considered’ often enough, we shall feel quite nervous – but we shan’t count the candles any the better for feeling these factitious tremors.)

I now want to apply some of these truisms to some matters which concern epistemologists very closely.

Laymen and epistemologists frequently ask questions of the form ‘How do you know that?’ e.g. ‘How do astronomers know that the moon weighs so many tons?’ ‘How do we know that there is a life after death?’ ‘How do we know that the future will resemble the past?’ But these questions are put in very different tones of voice. Sometimes they are asked in a mood of genuine inquisitiveness. We hope and expect to be told how astronomers weigh the moon. Sometimes they are asked in a sneering tone of voice: ‘Of course you are only thinking wishfully when you say that there is a life after death.’ Sometimes they are asked in a defeatist tone of voice: ‘Alas, it is impossible
that we shall ever find out that the future will resemble the past!"

For the moment I want to consider the ‘How do you know?’ question as it is posed from genuine inquisitiveness. The questioner will be satisfied when the procedure by which, say, the weight of the moon was ascertained is described to him; or, if he is a very critical person, if the procedure is both described and justified to him. That is, he knows that there are lots of different procedures by which things are ascertained, and in putting his question he wants to know which procedure was used or what combination of which procedures.

Now here the questioner is clearly leaving epistemology far behind. For the official doctrine of epistemology is that there is only one sort of procedure by which things are ascertained, namely the procedure of deducing truths from previously ascertained premisses. What we do not ascertain by deduction we ascertain in ‘intuition’ (or ‘acquaintance’). And ‘intuition’ or ‘acquaintance’ are offered to stand for ascertainment-modes which have no procedures. That there are supposed to be such procedureless ascertainment-modes is shown by the fact that ‘intuition’ (or ‘acquaintance’) is supposed to be mistake-proof. It’s not the sort of thing that could be got wrong, and consequently, as we have seen, is also not the sort of thing that could be got right. (Indeed the inclination to speak of the things we are supposed to intuit as being ‘given’ or ‘presented’ as ‘data’ shows that the speakers are avoiding the language of ‘getting it right’ or ‘getting it wrong’.)

In opposition to this prevalent opinion, I am maintaining that there are as many kinds of ascertainment-procedure as there are kinds of mistakes. Only one kind of ascertainment-procedure involves moving from ascertained truths to truths not previously ascertained. Other kinds of ascertainment-procedure involve operations of quite other sorts – and by this I do not mean that they all move to conclusions from unascertained premisses, such as probable or guessed premisses, but that they neither move from premisses nor to conclusions. They terminate, if all goes well, in certainties but they do not get there by inference. For example, a careful person can count the candles in the dining room and not merely get the answer right but know that he has made no mistake. But he has not demonstrated the number of candles from axioms or postulates, for he was not proving or deducing; he was counting. Or if he got the answer wrong, his error would not have been a fallacy, but perhaps one of counting one candle twice or forgetting that ‘11’ comes between ‘10’ and ‘12’. (Of course he might do some arguing in the course of counting, for fun, or as a check. He might argue, ‘If there are twelve candles, then if I blow out six, six will still be burning’, and having blown out six and then counting
only five still burning, satisfy himself that he had miscounted in the first place.)

By a ‘procedure’, whether an ascertainment-procedure or a shoe making procedure we mean a method of operating; a way of acting which is subject to rules. Now logicians have since Aristotle studied the rules of inference; and their early success has dazzled philosophers into supposing that there exist no other kinds of rules operation in conformity with which can lead to knowledge. True, the rules of inductive enquiry have resisted assimilation to the rules of deduction with such doggedness that people have toyed with the idea that induction has no rules (i.e. that it cannot be done carelessly or carefully, successfully or unsuccessfully). The notion that induction is neither valid nor invalid deduction, but is an ascertainment-procedure of another kind has not yet been properly carried.

I want now at once to illustrate and to test the points I am making by applying them to the vexed questions of perception. I want to show not merely that perceptual ascertainment has its procedures, but that we all know well how to talk about these procedures, give advice about them, teach the young to observe them, and so on. (My project has this topical interest, that if it is successful it will show that – and where – the Sense-Datum Theory is an epistemologist’s myth.) First, it is possible and for our ends useful to divide our ordinary observation-verbs (and observation-nouns) into two families. First there are the verbs which signify engagement in a task of trying to ascertain something. These we shall call ‘Task-observation-verbs’ or ‘Task-verbs’ for short. Next, there are the verbs which signify accomplishment of the task, i.e. ascertainment of something. I shall call these ‘Achievement-observation-verbs’ or, for short, ‘Achievement-verbs’.


Now plenty of adverbs can be attached significantly to task-verbs which cannot be significantly attached to achievement-verbs. I can watch carefully, but I cannot descry carefully; I can peer closely but I cannot see closely; I can look hard at a hawk, but I cannot espy a hawk hard; I can savour wines methodically but I cannot taste them methodically (save in the vintners’ sense of ‘taste’).
Epistemologists have tended to discuss questions of perception chiefly in terms of the achievement-verbs – with the verb ‘to perceive’ being given pride of place. Not unnaturally they have, in consequence, given very queer accounts of observational mistakes, i.e. perceptual mis-achievements. For they have not thought of perception as the accomplishment of an ascertainment-task, and therefore they have not thought of perceptual mistakes as bungled ascertainment-tasks.

To correct the balance, it should be enough to consider for a moment the advice and corrections that an astronomer would give to a pupil who was learning to observe the heavens, or the advice and corrections that a nurse gives to a child who is learning to observe the extra-mural world.

There are certain sorts of things that we ascertain by (or not without) observation, and this kind of ascertainment has its rules of procedure just as much as have deduction, induction, weighing, measuring and counting, adding, multiplying and subtracting, and so on. True, we have no manuals containing written formulations of the rules of observational procedure (partly because we have to learn to observe before we can learn to read). But we are familiar with the sorts of exercises which make people better at ascertaining different sorts of things, such as estimating distances at sight, seeing through camouflage, identifying aircraft by sight and sound, and so on.

The epistemologist with the usual theoretical habits may bring himself to attend to the ways in which we use task-verbs, and may come to agree that our uses of achievement-verbs are correlated in certain important ways with our uses of task-verbs. But he will still feel that a theory is being based upon what is exceptional rather than what is regular. For ordinarily when I report having seen a cow or detected a smell of gas, I cannot, with the best will in the world, report the prior occurrence of a process of scrutiny. Seeing a cow is not something accomplished as the terminal stage of a methodical process, however swift. No task was accomplished, undertaken or envisaged. I just saw a cow. I did not so manage things or so organise my doings that at the last I saw a cow. Seeing a cow was, in an important way, the first thing that happened. Granted that sometimes before I can recognise an unfamiliar object or a familiar object in a strange setting I may go through the business of considering rival hypotheses, trying ‘to make it look like so and so’ or trying ‘not to make it look like such and such’. (The child in his first game of hunt the thimble may be looking straight at the thimble, but cannot see the thimble because it is, say, floating upside down in the goldfish bowl. After more practice he will spot the thimble without perplexities or experiments
wherever the thimble may be.) I am perplexed, and my moves are tentative.

Now we must of course grant that the recognition on sight of the obvious cow is not the last move in a series of moves. Nothing had been done and nothing needed to be done to pave the way for my seeing the cow (nor do I ordinarily take any steps either to read the words of an English book or to make sense of them). But the non-occurrence of preliminaries does not entail the non-exercise of a technique. We do not say that someone is skilful at something only when he frowns and hesitates over the doing of it; indeed, one of the signs that someone has achieved complete mastery of an art like signalling, pruning or long-division, is that he regularly performs perfectly the ordinary tasks in it without his wondering how to do it or preparing himself for the task by any self-reminders, exhortations, exercises or other preliminaries.

Now we are all in the position of having achieved perfect mastery of the art of recognising on sight the customary occupants of our customary environment – at least, when the light is good or fair, our health is normal, we are not dizzy or standing on our heads looking through strange optical instruments and so on. When all is plain sailing, no navigational problems are considered, nor do we try to make out what we are looking at when we get a fair view of a lonely cow in the sort of place where cows are among the things that we are not surprised to come across. Of course we had once to learn how cows look at different distances, from different angles and in different lights, as well as where cows can be expected to be found, and it is just because that lesson has been learned and not forgotten that the cow is now obvious to us. Its obviousness is the fact that the technique of recognising it on sight has no longer to be exercised in a tentative way – and when we do have to exercise the technique in a tentative way, as when a cow confronts us in thick fog, or in a hat shop, what we are looking at is for a moment or more not obviously a cow. And, of course, the fact that it is ordinarily obvious that what we are looking at is a cow does not exclude the chance of its not being a cow at all. It may be a goat, or a hole in the hedge looking like a cow. Or there may be nothing that looks like a cow and I am just ‘seeing things’. That such cases are exceptional is part of the meaning of such words as ‘see’, ‘perceive’, and so on, as well as of words like ‘obvious’. If ‘I see a cow’ were not usually true, I could not fancy I saw a cow. It is indeed the backbone of the present argument that mistakes can happen only where techniques are exercised; where nothing is managed, there is no mismanagement, and where there are no rules there are no breaches of rules.

In case it is still felt that the promptness of our recognition of the common objects of observation is inconsistent with this recognition being a sort of
technical achievement, we may notice one or two other cases where promptness is taken as evidence for rather than against technical ability. A facile talker reporting rapidly changing events (like the incidents of a football match), may complete his sentences not merely without breach of grammatical rules, but sometimes with wit, elegance or pungency. He has no time in which to premeditate his comments, yet he may so frequently produce the graphic phrase and the telling verdict that his listeners will credit him with a special skill. Here the cleverness is shown in producing promptly not merely the hackneyed comment but the appropriate expression. Compared with this, our prompt recognition of that hackneyed object the cow shows perhaps equal facility, but much less inventiveness.

Next, a bright undergraduate engaged in an argument on a novel topic may see in a flash an implication of a point made by his opponent; or he may seize on the flaw in his opponent’s reasoning as swiftly as a boxer can parry a blow. Everyone will take such feats as these for exercises of logical acumen. Yet he did not know or guess what was coming. His counter move, then unplanned, is the right move to make. Now as spotting a fallacy is an achievement of one sort, so spotting a cow is an achievement of another sort. For the former one has to be some good at ratiocination, for the latter one has to be some good at observation – a different skill but nevertheless a skill – though it is one on which few of us preen ourselves, since we all have to be some good at everyday observation, and we learn its main methods before we go to school. It’s a pre-scholastic aptitude.