

## Visiting the optician

At the optician for a sight test we are confronted with a 'test card' or some other diagram. Various lenses, in combination, are set up for us to try. 'Is this better - or that?' The aim is to find a combination of lenses that best corrects our faulty vision. Once a satisfactory correction has been determined it can be passed to a manufacturer of spectacles to make a new pair of glasses.

All this depends, of course, on the assumption that there is a 'correct view' about which everyone can agree. Putting it even more strongly, that there is a tangible reality (the test card) which is precise and can be reproduced exactly. Furthermore, the lenses are 'standard' product. The test is repeatable.

The resulting lens prescription that suits one person will very probably suit no-one else. The question from the optician resonates: Is this view better? Or that? We have a choice, and many find themselves a bit perplexed: what is the correct answer? Often it is perfectly clear, but sometimes it is more difficult to decide.

Increasing numbers of people including me have undergone cataract surgery, in which a faulty natural eye-lens is replaced by a prosthesis, often providing sight correction that is far better (in at least one respect) than the patients have ever known in their lifetime. My own experience replaced a natural lens that was not only obscured by a cataract but had offered me extreme short sight for many decades. After cataract surgery my 'new eyes' were very close to normal – a wonderful change. But I could never have foreseen the profound change in perspective following the surgery and new glasses.

I described it as a change from viewing the world through a wide-angle lens to looking instead through a telephoto lens. It has proved quite difficult to get used to. After two years I feel perfectly comfortable with the change, but it has prompted a question: what, really, was the 'shape' of the world I had been looking at for seventy-odd years? Was that an accurate representation of reality? And what of the view now, with its clear, beautiful colours: is this what reality is 'really' like? In the end can I trust my own senses to give me a truly objective view of the world, one that I can meaningfully compare with the experience of other people?

Philosophers have long been puzzled by a similar problem. When two people report their delight at the beauty of a particular yellow flower, how do we know that what they are seeing is the same. More particularly, are they both experiencing the same sensation of 'yellow'. Indeed how could we answer that question?

We turn from simple questions about reading text, or reporting a sensation of colour, to even more complex questions about appreciation of art or music. Our first assumption, that there is one correct view about which there is universal agreement, must be set aside. There may be some general agreement about the worth of, say, the music of Beethoven, or the painting of Cézanne, while

listeners and viewers are free to declare that their art is not to their personal taste.

And when we come to our fundamental beliefs the issue is even more tangled. The 'God idea' is extremely important to many people, but meaningless to many others. There is also no agreement about what that 'God idea' actually means. Unlike the optician's test card, there is no standard image to which our view must conform. Unfortunately many people don't believe that; they form a view and then declare it to be the only admissible view, to which other people must conform. This 'one view', however, doesn't entirely rule out individuals cherishing their own view/image/idea. And why not? A great deal of harm has been done by people who, in their conviction of their own rightness, insist on their right to require others to hold the same view. The Christian belief that individual believers are in some sense 'in relationship' with God is hardly consistent with the idea that our 'view' of God is mediated exclusively by other humans.

How do we compare notes with other believers? Would this get us nearer to 'the truth'? We might understand one another better, and learn to avoid using language like 'heresy' and 'unbeliever'.