

## What Is Perception? Explain The Role of Perception In An Account Of The Nature And Limits Of Human Knowledge

What do we mean when we discuss perception? How do we define it exactly and how does it relate to the world around us? Perception, in its most general form relates to how our senses interact with the outside world, namely the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. How useful are they in helping us gather information? This may seem like a fatuous question until one reassesses the reliability of the senses in observing and interacting with the objects and world around us. For instance the act of seeing really involves light from the object bouncing on your retina and is really presented to you as an upside down image. Our minds then only process the image and interpret the information. Sometimes we may be mistaken in trusting this information too much. How often have any of us said hello to someone we thought we knew, only to get closer and find out that we had mistook them for someone else? Therefore we can conclude that the senses will present us with a certain representation, which may or may not correspond to an exact object in reality.

Of course such an admission of doubt about knowledge can only be ready fuel to the radical sceptic's case. We once again have to grapple with the thought of being controlled by Descartes' evil demon if we cannot be fully sure about such everyday occurrences in trusting our senses. I would argue that it does not have to be a case of all or nothing. We can look at how objects may be defined from an idealist or realist perspective, see how perception fits in both, and then arrive at a clearer view of how much we may know from this.

In his *Problems Of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell gives us the example of a wooden table. We may look at it from different angles or in different lights, and its colour will always appear slightly different to each subjective observer. We cannot agree exactly on what colour it is. Likewise if we touch it, we may disagree on how hard or cold it is. We may agree on the mass of the table though, and so, in some terms, we can ascertain some common ground on its qualities. Such a conclusion about the table would represent a view of representative realism where a primary quality is mass, which everyone agrees on, against a secondary quality of colour, which nobody can. Proximity and relative size between objects is also relevant to perception. For instance, Physics tells us that the table, like us, is largely made up of atoms, which are minuscule when compared to the space between them. In essence the table is mostly empty space. Why do not see this? It may be a question of what we are designed for.

In everyday life we are used to judging relative sizes of objects and distances with ease. That is a result of evolution and Darwinism. If I throw a ball in the air, my dog will catch it. Neither of us will have to work out the calculus involved in either throwing the ball or catching it. This again will have to play itself out within tight proximity of both parties, which have similar sizes in terms of magnitude. If, like the main character in *The Incredibly Shrinking Man*, I shrink to three inches tall, my cat may drag me out to the back garden, torture me slowly and then drag me back on to the sitting room carpet as a present for my wife! This is because, our conscious minds (and the simpler minds of animals) are accustomed to making such judgements through experience. The scope of the criterion we can work in (among them size and proximity) are quite limited. We may see a dot on the horizon, shortly after realise it's more of a series of dots in a circle, and then soon after appreciate it is merely a flock of birds flying past, but we are just not hard-wired to detect what happens at the sub atomic level. With representative realism, it may be difficult to arrive at how to discern between primary and secondary qualities. A possible answer to this would be causal realism which is more logical as this accounts for an objects interaction with the subject.

If the objects do really exist, but we cannot objectively define them, then how can we confirm that they really exist at all? Enter the idealist argument that these objects are just perceived in our minds. They may or may not exist after we no longer perceive them. George Berkeley said that somebody would perceive them if not us and everything in any case is perceived by God. Is this scenario any different from dreaming? Then why is the world around us so uniform and ordered? As a brash counter argument Samuel Johnson kicked a stone in protest to Berkeley's theory that nothing is real. I find Thomas Reid arguments for common sense realism more persuasive. If everything is just in our heads, how do other people exist? Why should we consider them in our decisions? This may appear somewhat simplistic, but these arguments for common sense realism appear more practical, and are in keeping with the ideas of causal realism. In essence we may have to come to terms with the fact that not all knowledge can be fully known, or at least be able to accept that we have to assume some basics and live with fallible knowledge.

As an avid photographer I have always appreciated Roger Hicks' view on using prime lenses. In taking a picture we may have to approach the subject, get close, spend more time investigating certain angles. We may become part of the picture in doing so, and we are definitely interacting with it. The same principle applies to observation in everyday life and our general perception of reality. We have to approach it and appreciate it from every possible angle. Through realising our own position we can only place ourselves in the best vantage point. From there we can only use what we think we know to make the best decision we can.

## References

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The Incredible Shrinking Man

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Incredible\\_Shrinking\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Incredible_Shrinking_Man)

Roger Hicks

<http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/author/rogerhicks>

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