

Essay question:

What is perception? Explain the role of perception in an account of the nature and limits of human knowledge.

Essay answer:

Perception refers to the acquiring and organising of information about the external world through the use of our senses, namely sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. The use of our senses is the only way in which we can gather information about the external world, assuming one doesn't include telepathy or other paranormal processes.

Perception, whilst dependent on the senses however is not the same as sensation. Sensation involves the sense organs responding to stimuli, for example light, sound waves, pressure applied to ones skin in the case of touch etc.

Perception also needs to be distinguished from thought and memory as perception relates to information processing of an external object in real-time, therefore emphasis being on an object external to one's body and the object being present. Thoughts are the product of internal mental processes and can evoke images without reference to external objects or being dependent on immediacy of those objects being presented. Memories are a subset of thought referring specifically to past occurrences.

Given the consensus that perception is a key method for acquiring and organising information, can we infer that perception equates to knowledge?

To classify a claim as knowledge, 3 conditions must be met, 1. The claim must be true. 2. The claimant must believe in the claim. 3. The claimant must be justified in believing the claim is true. These 3 conditions are packaged in the theory of justified true belief (JTB).

That perception provides information therefore does not mean that perception is knowledge although clearly there is a relationship between perception and knowledge.

The question then becomes not whether perception is knowledge but how perception enables knowledge and how reliable perception is as a source of knowledge.

Perceptions role in the acquiring of knowledge has long been a subject of debate, divided into 2 main schools of thought, the empirical school and the rational school. The debate heightened in 17th and 18th century Europe between British philosophers Locke, Hume and Irish philosopher Berkeley in the empirical camp and on the Continental rationalist philosophers, Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza.

The empiricists argued that the mind is furnished with ideas through experiences. Locke referred to our minds as a 'tabula rasa' or blank slate at birth and through the course of our life being filled with ideas emanating from ones' experiences. Locke didn't discount that the mind had innate capacities. A modest empiricist, Locke, in his famous book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, refers to "the acts of the mind, wherein it exerts it's power over simple ideas". Locke goes on to discuss how the mind combines simple ideas

into complex ideas and then abstracts these ideas to form general ideas. He did however believe the mind required content much in the same that a computer hard drive gets filled with data over time through the execution of software programs, software here being the analogy for 'the acts of the mind'.

David Hume further developed the stance of empiricism in his *Treatise of Human Nature* referring to causation as a habit of the mind brought about by the constant conjoining of space and time. The mind, Hume argued, infers the existence of the earlier event to be the cause of the later event. Therefore, the mental reality constructed in the mind corresponds to the outside world and the experiences perceived from that external world.

Berkeley, a more radical empiricist equated existence with perception stating "to be is to be perceived" a position which puts Berkeley in the idealist camp by his suggesting that our total reality is a mental construct.

Descartes, however did not accept the 'tabula rasa' view of mind. He was hugely sceptical of the senses as a reliable source of knowledge and thought that the only fact we could be certain of was that we existed. Amidst all the doubt of whether the world around us is as it seems or even exists, in the 2nd *Meditation*, he argued the one certainty he could hold onto was that he existed given he was the one doing the doubting. This is famously coined in the Latin phrase 'Cogito Ergo Sum' or the original French version 'Je Pense, Donc Je Suis' in his 1637 *discourse on method*, both translating as 'I think therefore I am'.

In Descartes 1st *Meditation*, he discusses how our perceptions can deceive us, providing the examples of a round castle tower observed from a distance looking like a square and how people when far away appear to be tiny. He therefore sought to develop a foundationalist approach to understanding knowledge where our ideas are constructed to build an edifice of knowledge through using the 'reasoning faculties of mind' or deductive inference.

Leibniz in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, directly challenged Locke's empirical views however, stating that "nothing is in the intellect that was first in the senses, except the intellect itself".

The rationalist argument serves as support for abstract bodies of knowledge, for example pure mathematics and formal logic. Indeed, Emmanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, tries to reconcile the empirical and rationalist views by addressing Hume's 'constant conjunctivist' view on causation, reasoning that the conjoined experiences are contingent on the existence of time and space, but given you can't see or feel time or space, there must also be certain necessary categories of understanding for there to be any ideas, simple or complex, to exist at all. He refers to these categories of understanding beyond experience as noumena as opposed to phenomena.

If therefore, our senses can deceive us, are we then reliant on our faculty of reason, our deductive powers, to obtain an accurate understanding of the world around us. Whilst our senses can deceive us, it would seem that our reasoning abilities also fall short of the mark. In experiments performed in 1999 by then Cornell psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger, it was demonstrated that humans abilities to reason deductively are not only weak

relatively but we also fare poorly when it comes to recognising our own incompetence. This cognitive bias is now commonly referred to as the Dunning Kruger effect. That our deductive reasoning lags our inductive reasoning is perhaps a function of our evolutionary adaptation where forming inferences based on our external world through observation served us better equipped to survive for example a prowling sabre tooth tiger by our promptly responding to visual or auditory perceptions or in the case of foraging, not popping a poisonous bitter berry into our mouths.

To conclude, both our perceptions and our reasoning faculties serve us in the acquiring of knowledge but not without limits.

As we continue to develop, we learn more about the limits of both our senses and reasoning and can learn to apply conditions with which to evaluate if information we perceive meets the standard of knowledge or happens to just accidentally appear to be knowledge as illustrated in the Gettier problem. Maybe we're lucky to make the train ride this time on the back of the clock hands appearing to tell the correct time, maybe we've ticked the correct box on that multiple choice Mensa test but we would do well to be vigilant as to the limits of our perceptive and deductive capacities.