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Brian Edgar  
*Macalester College*

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## Resolving the Perceptual Dilemma: A New View of Perception

Brian Edgar

Despite all of philosophy's strengths, it is a recurring problem that, when it is asked to do something simple, it fails. Such is the case when it is presented with the question: How do we know what we see is real? Any layperson on the street would consider this question so simple-minded as to not be worth consideration. Philosophers, on the other hand, have spent the better part of their time since Descartes trying to answer this question.

I believe that I can show how a new view of perception can answer the question. I believe that our minds directly perceive light (and sound, smells, etc.). This idea allows us to have knowledge of physical objects by the fact that, while we do not directly perceive them, we do directly perceive something from the physical world. I do not claim to be wiser or more insightful than those that have gone before me. However, they cannot resolve what I call the Perceptual Dilemma: the dilemma between Naive and Representational Realism. Knowing only these ways of viewing the world, and finding both to be unworkable, they found themselves unable to know anything. I will show that my idea provides a third alternative and that this new way of looking at things leads to knowledge of the world and a new understanding of the mind.

### **On the Empiricist's View of Perception, The Two Realisms, and the Perceptual Dilemma**

The Empiricists faced a problem with regard to perception. They could not explain how one might have any knowledge at all based on one's senses. Locke and Hume were trapped in the Perceptual Dilemma, and even Kant was still caught in the ideas of it, unable to go beyond the language, and hence the ideas, that spawned the problem.

The Empiricists claimed that Naive Realism was the "common sense" view of perception. Resting strongly on the idea of direct perception, its fundamental tenet was simply this. We (our minds) directly perceive material objects as they are. This seems to the layman to have no problems, and one would think that nothing could be so obvious. Yet philosophers do not recognize clarity as a justification. In the next section, I will show that philosophers approached Naive Realism without hope of justifying it. For now, though, I mean only to show what they thought of it.

Naive Realism falters from the fact that it claims we perceive objects as they truly are. Yet an object appears different depending on how we perceive it.

A pencil viewed from its side looks very different than a pencil viewed from the front. It would seem to follow, then, that objects are different depending on how we view them. Yet our idea of real objects does not allow them to be mutable in this way. Thus we must conclude that what we perceive are not the objects in themselves.

Representational Realism was supposed to be the rational, empirical solution to this problem. By it, our minds perceive objects "indirectly." We have impressions of physical objects, yet never any direct knowledge of them. Different philosophers explained this phenomenon in different ways, but all of them fell before one basic principle: all knowledge must have some basis in experience. This is the fundamental tenet of the Empiricist philosophy. Yet if this is true, it has serious repercussions for Representational Realism. Since we are only aware of the impressions, we have no basis for knowing how these impressions are caused. Thus, with no knowledge of the relation between our impressions and the real world, we have no knowledge of the real world. These two points of view were the only ways philosophers of the time had to explain how we perceive things. When their own reasoning showed that both of these methods fail to adequately explain the world, they became (and in some ways philosophers remain) trapped in the Perceptual Dilemma. With these sorts of choices open to them, Empiricist-era philosophers were unable to get beyond solipsism and skepticism or plain error.

All epistemologists faced some variation on this dilemma. Their responses vary from Berkeley, who simply turned away from the problem, to Kant, who created a fabulously intricate system to try to explain the simple fact that he knew physical objects existed. Since Descartes, philosophers have felt that this question had to be addressed first. They figured that if they could not prove such an obviously factual statement, they probably could not prove anything. Yet they failed and were constantly frustrated in their attempts. This was because they could not go beyond the thinking of the Perceptual Dilemma.

### **On Alternate Theories of Perception, and a New Alternative**

In the last few decades, different people have come forward with new views on the ideas of perception. One of these is W. V. Quine. Quine's important contribution, at least in my opinion, is the redefining of the role of the philosopher in regards to the Perceptual Dilemma and the identification of where some of the Dilemma's roots lie. Quine points out that one of the flaws of the early epistemologists was that they attributed to introspection what they knew from their scientific knowledge. Berkeley goes into some detail about how we only perceive objects as two-dimensional and have to use our binocular vision to infer the depth of an object. But Quine demonstrates this is false. Perhaps it fits as a description of how our eyes work as the physical devices they are, but not as how our minds

work. When I am viewing an object, I perceive it in three dimensions. I see it as having depth. Quine mentions the example of an artist. A painter must be trained in rendering what she sees as a two-dimensional image. The tricks of perspective and shading are arduous to learn. Thus, Quine argues that early philosophers confused their scientific knowledge with their intuition. He asserts that the problems that lead to solipsism come not from philosophy, but from science itself. Thus, he sees the philosopher as

a defender or protector. He no longer dreams of a first philosophy, firmer than science, on which science can be based; he is out to defend science from within, against its self-doubts (Quine, 3).

Another assailant of the old philosophies is J. L. Austin. Austin does an excellent job of pointing out that early philosophers made Naive Realism implausible by definition. Even the name implies a falseness or ignorance. He points out examples where epistemologists have associated Naive Realism with "the plain man." In doing so, they make it sound like Naive Realism is the view of someone who simply has not thought things through. "It does not normally occur to him that his belief in the existence of material things needs justifying, but perhaps it *ought* to occur to him" (Austin, 9).

Most importantly, Austin goes into great detail about a difference between illusion and delusion. He claims that most philosophers obscure the distinction in their arguments concerning perception. An illusion is some sort of trick in the arrangement of an image that makes one perceive a quality to an object that is not truly there. A delusion, on the other hand, is something springing wholly from the mind. In many of their arguments, Austin notes, epistemologists bring examples of illusion (a stick bending in water, objects shrinking with distance, etc.) and use them to show that these are images coming from the mind, not the objects. Yet that implies that they are delusions. There is something in them that causes us to see them as we do; these are not effects our mind manufactures. Austin is quite right in saying that this distinction is an important one to keep in mind. Yet he neglects questions that one might raise: Why is it that these illusions occur? What is it that we do perceive?

I believe that I can answer that. Our minds directly perceive *light*. As a physicist, I know that all the "illusions" referred to above can be explained in terms of reflection, refraction, etc. Furthermore, this gets us out of the solipsistic predicament. Light is a physical object, at least in the sense that it is not a construction of the mind. One might argue that we do not really know about light. We just have scientific theories about it, which definitely are constructs of the mind. But I am assuming that, whatever our theories about light are, what we

perceive is a non-mental object called light.<sup>1</sup> Thus we are perceiving something separate from us, a "real world."

A description of how we know that this light describes objects as they really are is complicated and truly more of a problem for physics than philosophy. Yet we can begin to understand it through this question: where does light come from? Physics tells us it must come from charges being accelerated in a periodic fashion. Hence, when we look at an incandescent light bulb, we are seeing light caused by electrons in the filament being shook rapidly by heat. Yet the chaotic nature of this mechanism of creation tells us that the light leaving the bulb will be all different wavelengths, thus we perceive it as white. So, we have at least one type of physical object—sources of light.

When this light reaches an object, the action can be described in several different ways. I will try to pick one that is the best mix of simplicity and clarity. Basically, light is a traveling, regular disturbance in the electric and magnetic fields. These disturbances take the form of waves that reinforce one another and allow them to move through space. When these waves encounter an object, the wavelengths of some of the waves match the lengths of the atomic bonds in the molecules, while others do not. Those that do not are absorbed into the atom and cause the whole atom to vibrate. (We perceive this motion as heat.) Those wavelengths that match the bond lengths cause the electrons in the atoms to vibrate. These vibrating electrons send out light of their own. Physics can tell the exact relation between the light radiated and the vibration, but for the most part it is identical to the light that caused the vibration. Thus we say that the wavelength of light was either reflected or refracted by the object, depending on whether the light is going on through the object or has been sent back in the other direction. Our mind then interprets the different wavelengths as different colors. We know that the light created by a light bulb is white, therefore, something else must be sending the colored light we perceive. Thus we have all the other types of physical objects.

One might argue that when I look at a pen, I'm not seeing the absorption patterns of its electrons, I'm seeing its color. I agree. But physics tells us that to perceive the colors I do, the pen must have such-and-such qualities. All my hand-waving above is really just a complicated way to say that the knowledge of what objects are independent of human perceptions can best be discovered by physicists. It does not change the point. The light we perceive is a physical object; yet its nature does not allow for it to exist spontaneously. Therefore, it must be created and altered by other objects.

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<sup>1</sup> This does not beg the question any more than the fundamental positions of Naive and Representational Realism. What remains now is to show that this assumption does not lead to any inconsistencies and avoids solipsism.

Also, this kind of argument extends to the other senses: our minds perceive vibrations in air (hearing), certain chemical structures (smell and taste), and most importantly, through touch, our minds are directly aware of contact with a physical object. Psychologists believe that an object is not "real" for an infant until she can touch it. This is easily accepted if one takes the view of touch as perceiving the existence of an object. In time, of course, we integrate our other senses better and can determine (usually) the existence of an object without having to touch it.

Objections to this position are easily handled. One critic might counter that we don't really directly perceive these things, our sense organs do. These then transmit impressions to the mind. Thus, she would argue, we are cut off from the world—isolated in our own body. To this I would simply ask her, "What, then is my body?" Her counter-argument has assumed that the body is not a part of the mind. But if this is so, then there is at least one thing that exists outside the mind—the body—in which case, the impressions we receive make no sense unless there are other physical things affecting the body. Furthermore, the above example assumes that the mind and body are separate entities. As I will show in the next section, another form of the objection will lead to quite an intriguing line of thought regarding this.

One might also ask, "Can the body be perceived directly?" In fact, it is hard to say whether the body can be perceived directly, because the body is the perceiver. The question has to be more specific to be able to be answered. Generally, I would say yes. If you close your eyes and have someone take your hand and move it around, you could have a general idea of what position you are in because you are aware of the positions of your joints and muscles. If you are asking, however, "Can one perceive directly the body-as-perceiver?", that seems an odd question to me. It is like asking, "How can I see that I am seeing?" The action of perception is itself the evidence of it.

Another objection is one used under the arguments from illusion that refuted Naive Realism. It is the example of putting one hand in a jar of cold water and the other in a jar of hot water. If one then puts both hands into one jar of room temperature water, one gets different perceptions of the temperature from each hand. It would then seem to follow that we are not really perceiving the temperature of the water through touch. This objection, however, has a false assumption in it. It assumes that temperature has some objective value for our mind to perceive. In actuality, heat is the movement of molecules and atoms at the microscopic level. A thermometer measures temperature by how much the moving molecules around it cause a given amount of mercury to expand. But the thermometer is made such that the mercury takes up a certain volume at a certain temperature and all other temperatures are measured relative to that.



The mind's way of perceiving temperature works in a similar way. In each nerve, there are four different detectors. These can be thought of as Pain, Pressure, Hot, and Cold. (Some specialized nerves have special receptors, but these four are the most common.) The reason we have two sensors for temperature is that they react to the *changes* in temperature. Thus the hand that was in the cold water is warming up (and we perceive Hot in that hand), while the other is cooling off (and we perceive Cold). The fact remains that to say something is hot or cold only makes sense in terms of some arbitrary "normal" value. Thus to say our minds cannot perceive whether or not something is hot or cold is almost meaningless.

Other, more grounded, objections might be, "How can we have knowledge of light?" or "How can we know what sound really is?" These answers are, again, best left to physics and physiology, but I see the point of them. The critic is asking me how we can have knowledge of our means of getting knowledge. This same problem led to difficulties for several of the empiricist philosophers. This was because they thought of all perception as one thing. Yet each sense can be used to corroborate the others. If, for example, I wish to analyze the mechanism of hearing, it is a simple matter to examine the mechanism of the ear and see that it seems to react to vibration. Also, I can see a bell clapper striking and associate the sound with the image. If the bell is resonant, I will hear a prolonged ringing sound after the clapper has stopped. If I then put my hand on the bell, I will momentarily feel a vibration. As the vibration ceases, I notice the sound disappear. I can conclude that it is the vibration of the bell that I am detecting somehow. If I wished, I could put the bell in a vacuum chamber to determine that a medium for the vibration is necessary. Thus, the proof of the accuracy of our senses is that they all corroborate one another.

### **On the Consequences of My View and Another Look at the Mind-Body Problem**

In the previous section, I mentioned the possibility of one of the objections to my theory having interesting consequences. Here is a counter-example. Consider a man who has lost his eyes. There is nothing changed about the light reaching him, but he does not perceive it any more. Yet if the only two things involved in the perception we call sight are light and the mind, it would seem to follow that the loss of the man's eyes has caused some kind of an alteration in his mind. This would clearly seem to be false; therefore, my theory is untenable.

When I first thought of this, I had thought that it would be the critique of my position which I would have the hardest time defending. Then a solution occurred to me. The counter-example rests on the assumption that a change in the body cannot produce a change in the mind. Yet why should we grant that? Indeed,

it is easy to see that that is not the case. The whole point of various forms of drugs, from cocaine to alcohol, is to alter the function of the mind.

However, we usually restrict the connection to the brain. We don't think of our minds residing in our little finger. Yet, what if we were to allow that all parts of the body are linked to the mind? What if no distinction was made between the mind and the body? This is easier to do than it may sound. I find it difficult to define the mind, just because it has no distinct border. I use the phrases "my mind" and "myself" interchangeably throughout the paper. Yet I do not consider myself to be some sort of spirit inhabiting a body. My skin, hair, feet, pancreas—all these things are myself. The best distinction I can draw is that my body is all the physical aspects of me, while my mind is a single word to describe all sensations, emotions, thoughts, actions, and memories of the body. The best analogy I can think of is a computer's hardware and software. The hardware is the computer's body; R is everything that can be seen and touched: keyboard, monitor, CPU, etc. The software is the programming, the information encoded on the drives. To be a better analogy, the computer's mind would encompass not only the software, but the patterns of electrical flow through the circuits and the information being transferred between the different parts of the computer. But one could argue that the software is physical: it is the physical arrangement of the atoms on the drive. In a quantum sense, the electrons flowing through the circuits are physical as well. It's hard to draw the line between physical and mental in a computer, and even harder to do so in the body, where our minds are made up of cellular chemical exchanges and synaptic discharges. Thus, what sense does it make to regard the mind and body as separate things? How can we speak of a mind apart from the body it describes? How can we speak of a body that does not relate to itself? Where does this lead?

I point out that the idea of a closer tie between mind and body is a large part of many modern philosophers, feminist philosophers especially. Yet it seems to be ridiculous to think that our minds alter with the loss of a limb, a haircut, or the trimming of our fingernails. This is because we associate our minds with "what we **really** are." How can our body's changes affect our identities?

The problem stems from the view of the mind as our identity. We view our identity as a static thing, changing slowly and in discrete steps if at all; yet we are in a constant state of flux. Our minds are more than the machines of reason that 18th century philosophers would have them. Our minds also include our sensations, our emotions, our memories. I do not believe it is possible to separate the mind from the various senses we take in, and they are constantly changing. Anyone who has walked into a room only to realize they can't remember why they went there will recognize that memory is in a state of flux as well. The same holds for the emotions.



Furthermore, just like our minds, our bodies are in constant flux. The skin is constantly shedding layers away. The pancreas replaces almost all its cells every day. Also, just as changes in the body affect the mind, physicians are starting to take seriously the mind's effect on the body. Terminally depressed patients have a much worse chance of surviving an illness. It all points to a blurring of the distinction between the mind and the body.

Thus, when someone loses an arm, their minds alter in many ways. First, they no longer have sensations in their arm; thus, their mind has altered since sensations are a part of the mind.<sup>2</sup> They no longer send commands to that limb to do actions; thus, their minds have altered in their habits. And they may experience an emotion change due to the loss. All these are relevant mental changes. So we see that a change in the body has produced a change in the mind.

I do not want to say that it is meaningless to draw a distinction between the mind and body. Yet I feel such a distinction must necessarily be arbitrary, and I am unable to think of one general enough. I am at a loss to come up with a better analogy for how the two are related than the one I outlined in the broad description above: the mind affects the body, and the body affects the mind.

To conclude, I find myself wanting to comment on how the idea of this Mind/Body flux seems to indicate some amount of "mind" in our discard hair and skin. This leads me to believe that it must exist in our food as well, thus in animals, plants, minerals in the soil, even rocks. Yet, despite my belief in the truth of these ideas, these topics are all beyond the scope of this paper. I wish only to say what I have already said: my view of perception leads to a way of understanding the mind that is starting to be popular. Like our senses, our philosophical ideas are justified on how well they support one another. Thus, I believe I have contributed something significant that will help resolve the Perceptual Dilemma.

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, many amputees occasionally complain of feeling an itch coming from the missing limb. But this is an unimportant side note; the sensations are markedly different, leading to a distinct mental (relating to one's sensations) change.