

When Should We Trust Our Senses to Give Us Truth?

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2. When should we trust our senses to give us truth?

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When Should We Trust Our Senses to Give Us Truth?

Our senses are the link between our minds and our environment; we rely on them for our tactical, visual, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory acquisition of knowledge. Our dependence on our senses for knowledge heightens our need to critically evaluate the information they deliver.

5 Only through maintaining a balance between trusting our senses and assessing their congruence with pre-existing knowledge can a knower achieve a state of perceptive, yet thoughtful, acquisition of knowledge.

The goal of a knower is to positively contribute to society; that is, to benefit his community, be it a personal, family, city, or worldwide community, with his knowledge. A nation's president's decisions contribute to society; even sharing one's personal opinions in a Theory of Knowledge class can constitute positively contributing to society, if the knower's comments are made constructively. A knower's knowledge, or lack thereof, determines the overall content and effect of a contribution, be it positive or negative. A knower's primary sources of information are his five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. Senses are the gateways that allow a knower to glean knowledge from his experiences and environment.

15 In order to determine the "truth" of senses, a knower must compare his sensory perceptions to his pre-existing knowledge and determine whether the information is congruent. This process occurs constantly without a knower usually noticing it; a knower does not question every sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste, but rather considers and accepts them in the context of his environment. Occasionally, however, sensory perceptions contradict a knower's expectations. An astute knower critically evaluates the conflicting message, searching for more information until the sensation is understood. Minor misinterpretations of senses can occur on a day-to-day basis; for example, a knower may mishear a friend's greeting, "Hello!" as "Yellow!"

An incisive knower, detecting a friend calling out the names of colors for no apparent reason, would be confused. He would take measures to clarify his perception, including reassessing his recent auditory sensation, or asking for a repetition. Though such interchanges may appear trivial, they reveal the process a knower must constantly undertake to assure his senses' truth.

Despite a knower's determination to ensure his senses' truth, misinterpreted senses can dangerously foster widespread, untrue beliefs. When the ancient Greek astronomer Ptolemy viewed the sky, he visually sensed that the stars, moon, and sun appeared to move, while tactilely sensing that the earth was stationary. His sensory perceptions led him to develop the geocentric, or Earth-centered, model of the solar system¹. Ptolemy's 130 AD model, though falsified by modern scientific knowledge, was widely accepted for centuries; it was congruent with what humans could perceive at the time. Later, Copernicus, and still later in 1610, Galileo Galilei visually observed Venus's waxing and waning² with his new telescope technology. His observations empirically supported the heliocentric, or sun-centered, model of the solar system. Despite Galileo's advancements, mankind's perception of the solar system was still limited in comparison to modern knowledge. Ptolemy and Galileo based their conclusions on their senses. Current knowledge of the solar system, though more extensive, is based on the same human senses. The knowledge of the scientific community, though growing every day, could be drastically altered by a new perception. Though senses may appear to give truth at the time, that truth is limited by the extent to which our senses can perceive it.

A knower's senses can also be altered by external means to perceive a "different truth".

The correctness of this "different truth" is dependent on cultural beliefs and context. A

¹ Aardsma, Gerald A., Ph.D. "Geocentricity and Creation." Institute for Creation Research. July 1994. <<http://www.icr.org/article/382/>> Accessed 27 Dec 2008.

² Mosher, Tom and Pope, Jim. "Venus Through the Galilean Telescope." Galilean Telescope Homepage. 7 Oct 2006. <http://www.pacifier.com/~tpepe/Venus_Page.htm> Accessed 27 Dec 2008.

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45 fundamental value of many tribal societies, including the Sharanahua natives of eastern Peru, is
the use of hallucinogens in healing rituals³. Sharanahua shamans believe that the hallucinogen
ayahuasca enhances their senses, allowing them to perceive the spirit world in a dreamlike state
and drive pain and sickness out of their patient. The use of similar drugs, in a different context,
can be considered a dangerous alteration of one's natural senses. Experimentation with
50 hallucinogens such as Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) can result in disturbing sensations.
Recreational users of LSD may experience distressing distortions of reality, including unrealistic
sights and sounds, disorienting physical sensations, and even a loss of self-awareness⁴. Though
both LSD and ayahuasca fall into the category of psychedelic drugs, the context and cultural
"truth" they elicit are very different.

55 One may argue that, under the influence of mind altering drugs, no sensory perceptions
can be trusted to give truth. Indeed, the mental incapacitation induced by ayahuasca and LSD
prevents a knower from critically evaluating his sensations in comparison to his pre-existing
knowledge. One could also consider that the cultural tone attached to the use of ayahuasca and
LSD determines whether the sensations they elicit can be trusted as "truth". The shamans
60 believe that ayahuasca links their souls to the spirit world; though their perceptions are
influenced by the hallucinogen, in the context of their cultural society their belief and senses are
true. In the social context of recreational LSD use, conversely, the drug's hallucinogenic effects
distort truth rather than enhance perception of it. Thus, whether a knower can trust his senses in
the case of mind alterations is dependent on societal context.

³ Fridman, Eva Jane Neumann and Namba, Mariko. Shamanism. ABC-CLIO: 2004. 93.

⁴ Health Services at Brown University. "LSD." Brown University Health Education. 15 Dec 2008.
<http://www.brown.edu/Student_Services/Health_Services/Health_Education/atod/od_lsd.htm> Accessed
27 Dec 2008.

65 Senses can also be altered in a controlled way in order to improve a knower's physical wellbeing. Medicinal anaesthetics are used to diminish a knower's sense of pain in order to maintain his wellbeing. Prior to working on my teeth, my dentist anaesthetised my mouth. Though I was aware of forces being applied to my teeth and gums that would otherwise have caused pain, I felt none. As a knower, I evaluated that my senses were incongruous with my
70 knowledge of the situation; my senses were not providing me truth. However, the circumstances allowed me to accept the apparent incorrectness of my senses in conservation of my wellbeing. Similarly, a knower who experiences difficulty seeing, hearing, or utilizing any of their senses may turn to medical means to augment them. If a fire engine drives by, and all but a single knower covers their ears in reaction to the siren, the single knower will notice that his senses are
75 incongruous with those of his peers. A hard of hearing knower, for example, requires a hearing aid so that his auditory senses give him truth.

Though some senses can be misleading, others are designed to protect the body. Occasionally, a critical moment will occur when a sense "perceives" danger. Before a knower has time to interpret the perception and determine if a reaction is appropriate, he moves
80 reflexively. I once experienced a jarring reflexive incident while driving down the highway. Before I visually perceived a threat, I involuntarily snapped my head to the side. Immediately afterwards, a cracking noise on the windshield informed me that a rock, picked up by the car ahead, had struck my vehicle. Intrigued, I asked my father, an ophthalmologist, about my involuntary avoidance reaction. He explained that a unique "perception" occurs when an object
85 is rapidly converging bilaterally – towards the nose – on the retina of each eye⁵. The protective avoidance center of the visual cortex recognizes this event at a subconscious level and directs an

⁵ Drummond, G.T. M.D. FRCSC, Professor - Department of Ophthalmology - University of Alberta. Edmonton, Alberta. Private conversation. 27 Dec 2008.

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avoidance reaction – in this case, my involuntary head jerking. My reaction occurred before my visual sensation of the rock was recognized and consciously interpreted.

Ideally, a knower would be able to take the time to analyze a potentially dangerous
90 sensation, determine if the sense was “truthful” and, if necessary, react in time. In the case of reacting to a rock while driving, an analytical knower would realize that a reaction is redundant; the windshield would protect him, and he could continue concentrating on the road. However, a serious problem would arise if the same incident occurred while the knower was standing on the roadside without a protective barrier between him and the rock. If he took the time to analyze
95 the situation, he could not complete an avoidance reaction before he was struck. Our senses instigate the reflexive avoidance reaction which, though redundant and “untrue” in some situations, could be lifesaving in others.

When a knower attempts to understand the unknown – phenomena occurring in extreme outer space, or a newly discovered deep-sea species, for example – a problem arises. He cannot
100 compare his senses to pre-existing information. The knower is “discovering blindly” and is unable to determine whether his sensory perceptions are truth; there is no basis for comparison. Therefore, when one is experimenting or exploring in a situation where the truth of senses cannot be assessed, senses alone must be used. Though the notion of “blindly” relying on senses for truth appears dangerous, it is the basis for all explorations and new discoveries. New
105 experiences and sensory perceptions enable the acquisition of new information. New information cumulates and provides new and comprehensive understanding, which in turn is used as a comparison for sensory information in the future.

Our senses are paramount in understanding and interacting with society and our environment. However, sensory perception alone does not suffice as a method of acquiring

110 knowledge. A knower who blindly accepts his perceptions, without critically evaluating their
congruence with his pre-existing knowledge, risks being deceived and confused by false beliefs.
At the same time, a knower who does not appreciate his senses will fail in his attempts to acquire
knowledge through them. A compromise of reliance on, and assessment of, senses for truth,
however, heightens the best attributes of both practices, providing a comprehensive outlook on
115 all issues in a knower's life.

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