While you may accept the idea that pain and taste are merely subjective experiences, you probably feel less sure about this way of thinking when it comes to such things as colours. Surely the sky is blue and snow is white and grass is green? Well, for *us* all of these things are of course true. But if we apply the same reasoning that we used in the cola example, we seem forced to admit that the green is no more in the grass than the sweetness is in the cola or the pain is in the fire. The green that you see when you look at the grass is, once again, simply the result of the interaction between your eyes and the underlying structure of the grass. And if our eyes had evolved differently and were sensitive to light of a different wavelength we would not see grass as green at all. We seem to be pushed towards the unsettling conclusion that the world in itself has no colour at all – reality is colourless.

**2 The tree in the forest**

Consider the well-known question 'If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?' The common-sense answer is to say that of course it makes a sound. Falling trees are noisy things. You may conjure up in your mind a picture of a huge tree falling and the tremendous crash it makes as it falls to the ground. But if you think that sound is nothing more than the effect of air vibrations on our ears, then it would seem to follow that if there are no ears in the neighbourhood, then the tree does not make a sound.

One way of trying to resolve the above puzzle is to make a distinction between two senses of the word 'sound'. $Sound_1$, we might say, is *physical* sound – that is, the vibrations in the air that are caused by things like falling trees. $Sound_2$, by contrast, is *experienced* sound – the actual crash, bang, wallop that we hear when trees hit the ground. We can now say that if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, there is $sound_1$ but no $sound_2$.

This solves the problem, but it may leave you with a somewhat eerie feeling. For it means that, if the phone rings after everyone has left my apartment in the morning, there may be vibrations in the air, but there is no distinctive 'ring-ring' sound. The most we can say is that if I were in my apartment then I would hear the phone ring. More dramatically, this way of thinking means that, millions of years ago before the emergence of life on Earth, our planet was a silent place. Breaking waves and storms and volcanoes set up vibrations in the air, but there were no crashes or bangs or wallops. And if right now we were to surgically remove the ears from all sentient beings, the world would again revert to silence.

Now consider another question: if a rose flowers and dies in an uninhabited garden and there is no one there to see it, does it have a colour? We might again distinguish between physical and experienced colour, and say that in the former sense it has a colour, and in the latter sense it does not. This seems to lead us to the conclusion that, before there were any eyes in the world, the sky was not blue, and the roses were not red, and the grass was not green – at least not in the experiential sense of these words.

The examples we have considered above suggest that we cannot say that colours, sounds and tastes exist out there independent of our experience of them. So we may begin to wonder whether *anything* can be said to exist independent of our experience of it.

### 3 The tables in the classroom

As a final example, consider the tables in your classroom at school. After you leave the room at the end of the day, how do you know the tables are still there? If you had nothing better to do, you could sneak back to school in the evening and take a look. I am confident that you would find the tables quietly sitting there just as you left them. But how do you know the tables are still there when no one is looking at them? (This is similar to the child's question: 'How do you know the light goes out when you close the fridge door?')

This may sound like a stupid question, and common sense will of course say that unobserved tables look much the same as observed tables. But how do you *know*? Perhaps tables only behave like decent, law-abiding tables when we are there to keep an eye on them; and perhaps when no one is around they dance around the room and turn somersaults.

You might think that there is a conclusive way to put an end to such surreal speculations. All you have to do is set up a video camera in the classroom, switch it on before you go home for the evening, and leave it running overnight. You will produce the most boring movie ever made: *Tables! The Motion Picture* – a movie in which absolutely nothing happens. This surely proves that unobserved tables behave in the same way as tables that are observed. But in fact your use of the video has not solved the problem, but merely relocated it. For the question now arises: 'How do you know that the images stay on the film when you are not watching it?'

This discussion may confirm your suspicion that philosophers spend their time asking useless questions that have no practical value. Surely life is too short to worry about what tables do when there is no one around to see them? Who really cares? Although we may be unable to *prove* that tables behave in standard table-like ways when we are not around, perhaps all that really matters is that they behave like tables when we are around. Perhaps we should conclude that what tables do in their spare time is no concern of ours!

## Theories of reality

There are three different theories about the relationship between perception and reality:

1. common-sense realism
2. scientific realism
3. phenomenalism.

### 1 Common-sense realism

This is the common-sense idea, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that the way we perceive the world mirrors the way the world actually is. However, since what we perceive is determined in part by the nature of our sense-organs, we have seen that there are good reasons for rejecting common-sense realism.

**ACTIVITY 5.10**

In your own words, outline the main arguments against common-sense realism.

### 2 Scientific realism

According to **scientific realism**, the world exists as an independent reality, but it is very different from the way we perceive it. The physicist Sir Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) once compared the common-sense description of a table with the scientific description of it. According to common sense, a table has extension and colour, and is comparatively permanent and substantial. But the scientific table is quite different:

> *It does not belong to the world previously mentioned – that world which spontaneously appears around me when I open my eyes ... My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient table. It supports my writing paper as satisfactorily as [an ordinary table] for when I lay the paper on it the little electric particles with their headlong speed keep on hitting the underside, so that the paper is maintained in shuttlecock fashion at a nearly steady level. If I lean upon this table I shall not go through; or, to be strictly accurate, the chance of my scientific elbow going through my scientific table is so excessively small that it can be neglected in practical life.*
>
> *Arthur Eddington,* The Nature of the Physical World, *London: Dent, 1935*

**KT – scientific realism:** the view that the real world is not the world as it appears to our senses, but as it is described by science

This brief description draws attention to the strangeness of the scientific picture of reality. The familiar, comfortable, sensuous world of our everyday experience vanishes and is replaced by a colourless, soundless, odourless realm of atoms whizzing around in empty space.

### 3 Phenomenalism

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed a philosophical position known as empiricism, according to which all knowledge must ultimately be based on experience. If we take this idea seriously, then we seem to arrive at a more radical position known as **phenomenalism**. According to this view, matter is simply *the permanent possibility of sensation*, and it makes no sense to say that the world exists independent of our experience of it. A phenomenalist would take the statement 'There are tables in the classroom at school' to mean not that the tables are in some deep sense there but simply that if you go to the classroom you will have various table-experiences. The Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685–1753) summed up the phenomenalist position with the famous slogan 'To be is to be perceived'.

**KT – phenomenalism:** an extreme form of empiricism which claims that physical objects are 'bundles of sense-data' that cannot be said to exist in themselves independently of our experience

Despite its counter-intuitive nature, phenomenalism seems to follow logically from the idea that all knowledge must ultimately be based on experience. For, if this is true, then we obviously cannot know what the world is like independent of our experience of it. This does not mean that the world does *not* exist independent of our experience of it – for that, too, is to make a claim that goes beyond the limits of

experience. The point is rather that, beyond our experience of reality, there is simply nothing to be said. Understood in this way, phenomenalism could be seen as a call to humility; for it insists that we can only know the world from our distinctively human perspective and have no right to pontificate about the nature of ultimate reality.

**ACTIVITY 5.11**

1. If you believed in phenomenalism, what difference, if any, would it make to practical life?
2. Does it bother you to think that we cannot know anything about what the universe is like independent of our experience of it?

## What should we believe?

The three theories of reality we have discussed can be summarised in the following three slogans.

**Common-sense realism:** 'What you see is what is there'

**Scientific realism:** 'Atoms in the void'

**Phenomenalism:** 'To be is to be perceived'

One interesting thing that comes out of this rather surreal discussion about the nature of ultimate reality is that if we push empiricism to its limits we end up with counter-intuitive conclusions. At this point we have a choice. We can either stick with empiricism and insist that we can know nothing about ultimate reality, or reject strict empiricism and insist that there is a world out there independent of our experience of it.

Deep down, most people are probably realists about the existence of the world. Despite the doubts we have raised about realism, there are perhaps two ways of trying to rescue it:

1. Although we cannot prove the existence of an independent reality, we might argue that it is the most reasonable hypothesis to account for the regularity of our experience. If, for example, you light a fire and return some hours later to find only a pile of ashes, the simplest way to explain what happened is to say that the fire was burning continuously in your absence.
2. The vast majority of people have a strong intuition that the world exists independent of our perception of it. As our discussion of scientific realism has shown, it may be very different from our everyday picture of it, but most scientists are intuitive realists and believe that they are making discoveries about an independently existing reality.