

# Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 18

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11/2/22

## Reminder

- Election day is 6 days away.
- You can vote at UMMA, just outside this building

## A Grand Theory of Perception

### Differences Between the Stages

### Experience Modification as a Good

## Four Steps

1. Physical world → sensory irritations
2. Sensory irritations → experiences
3. Experiences → beliefs
4. Beliefs → actions

## World to Inputs

We mostly think this is a matter for the scientists to discover.

- But note that there are two kinds of philosopher who disagree.

## World to Inputs

Sceptics think that there may not be an external world.

- And if not, the external world can't cause sensory irritations.
- But we're by and large setting them aside.
- For this part of the course, assume there is an external world, and it is much like science says it is.

## World to Input

Idealists (in this sense of idealist) deny that the external world is *physical*.

- They think that the world is in some sense fundamentally mental.
- Perhaps the entire world is a construction out of (perhaps merely possible) sense-experiences.
- Again, set that view to one side, though until recently it was very popular in Western philosophy.

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## Inputs to Experiences

We don't see firing rates in the optic nerve, or hear vibrations in the inner ear.

- It's only when these things are converted into experiences that we have perceptions.
- There are a few reasons to think that we are sensitive to things that we don't consciously experience - e.g., blindsight, or very fast reactions.
- But we'll mostly pay attention to things where there is a conscious experience.

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## Inputs to Experiences

I'll sometimes call these things 'appearances' or 'looks', when talking about visual experience.

- These are all meant to be the same kind of thing.
- As we get further into the book, we'll fuss more about some details here.

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## Experiences to Beliefs

We don't believe everything we see.

- Sometimes we ignore it. Actually most of the time I guess that's true; I have almost no beliefs about the periphery of my vision most of the time.
- Sometimes we overrule it, when we think something must be illusory.
- But we're interested in perception because so often we do take things to be as they appear.

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## Beliefs to Action

And sometimes belief leads to action.

- Not always in the way that would be optimal
- Sometimes there is a deer in the headlights effect
- Sometimes someone is committed to an action and does it even when they know by perception it would be wrong/pointless.
- But often enough.

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## Four Steps

1. Physical world → sensory irritations
2. Sensory irritations → experiences
3. Experiences → beliefs
4. Beliefs → actions

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## Where Does Philosophy Fit In?

A simple view:

- No role for philosophy at steps 1 and 2; they are just scientific question.
- Epistemology has a lot to say about step 3, about how beliefs are formed.
- And practical philosophy (ethics, philosophy of action) has a lot to say about step 4.

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## Where Does Philosophy Fit In?

Siegel's view:

- Somewhat sympathetic to the simple view about step 1, though we'll come back to it.
- But thinks that the theory of rationality should cover all of steps 2 to 4.

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## Three Questions

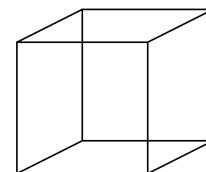
- Which of the four stages is under voluntary control (or anything like it)?
- Which of the four stages reflects skill on the part of the perceiver?
- Which of the four involves (or should involve) other beliefs?

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## Voluntary Control

- Stage 1 seems to. You can turn your head, close your eyes, shift your attention, or zone out.
- Stage 2 is a little harder to see intuitively, though maybe focus can do it.

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The necker cube 'illusion'

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## Voluntary Control

- Stage 3 doesn't seem to be voluntary; you can't just decide that this experience is good evidence that it will snow tonight.
- Stage 4 does seem voluntary; actions are paradigmatically voluntary (in normal circumstances)

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## Voluntary Control

- We'll want to come back to this point; you might think given the focus of epistemologists on stage 3, it should be **more** voluntary than the others.

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## Skill

Seems pretty clear that 1, 3 and 4 can show skill.

- Looking in the right places is a skill.
- Drawing the right inferences is a skill.
- Acting sensibly is a skill.

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## Skilled Looking

What's interesting is how much 2 seems to be a skill as well.

- An expert musician can *hear* what's wrong with an instrument/performance.
- A skilled neo-natal nurse can see that a baby is jaundiced.

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## Skill

There doesn't seem to be any difference between the steps here.

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## Penetration

For better or worse, the term 'cognitive penetration' has become to standard term for when a part of the mind is sensitive to other beliefs the person has.

- A big question in philosophy and psychology for the last few decades has been how much cognitive penetration there is, and should be.

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## Belief

Imagine that as leaving this classroom, you have the experience as of glancing an elephant from the corner of your eye.

- You should (and probably would) believe this is some kind of illusion.
- This isn't a zoo, and getting an elephant up those stairs (or worse still, into those awful elevators) would be tough.

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## Belief

What you believe on the basis of an experience is, and should be, sensitive to what else you believe.

- As we sometimes put it, belief formation should be holistic.

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## Experience

Big questions:

1. How much is experience sensitive to what we antecedently believe?
2. How sensitive should it be?

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## Experience

One view:

- Experience is, and should be, isolated from belief.
- If someone sets up a careful illusion as of an elephant in the hallway, you should (and probably would) quickly infer that it is an illusion.
- But you should, and probably would, get the illusory experience. You should have the experience of an elephant.

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## Experience

Of course, things can't be quite this simple.

- Skill can change how the world looks. Think again about the musician or the nurse.
- But the thought on this view is that belief alone doesn't do that; it's a distinct task to acquire this skill.

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## Siegel's Position

1. Background beliefs can affect experiences themselves, not just what conclusions we draw from them.
2. While this could be good, if the background beliefs are irrational, and especially if they are pernicious, as in the case of racist or otherwise prejudiced beliefs, the experiences themselves are irrational.

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## Siegel's Position

That is, we can ask about the rationality of the irritation → experience transition, along with other transitions in the perceptual process.

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## Helping and Hijacking

The big theme of this chapter is that experience can be **hijacked** by bad prior beliefs.

- Side note: I'm calling these beliefs, but there is a *big* debate about whether prejudices in general are beliefs. Maybe we'll come back to that.
- Worth spending some time on the case where they are influenced by good beliefs.
- What's the best word here? Not hijacked really.

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## Good Cases

Some of the skilled observing cases I talked about earlier are like this.

- Plausibly linguistic interpretation is like this too.
- Chess players are better at remembering positions of pieces on a board, but that advantage falls away a lot when the positions are not real game positions.
- Your experience of these very words is affected by the fact that you know that they are words, and what they mean.

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## Good Process, Bad Results

There are some amusing cases where these two things interfere.

- One of these, that you're probably familiar with, is the Stroop effect.
- On the next slide, say (to yourself) as quickly as possible the colors that each word is written in.

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Blue

Brown

Green

Purple

Red

Yellow

Teal

Black

Pink

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Let's try it again, with some rotations.

Red

Yellow

Teal

Black

Pink

Blue

Brown

Green

Purple

A Grand Theory of Perception  
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Differences Between the Stages  
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Experience Modification as a Good  
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Hijacking

Typically, people who can read English will do worse on this than people who cannot.

- Next week, we'll move on to chapters 2 and 3, and talk about how this might affect the rationality of perception.