

ON APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Based on the essay by Bertrand Russell

- The problem of appearance and reality raises epistemological concerns about the problem of perception, common sense and spontaneity as means of gaining knowledge
- When philosophers reflect on the nature of knowledge and the world, they discover that the world is much more sophisticated, complex and even baffling than most people realize.
- The major epistemological question raised is; how can we know anything at all? In the history of Western philosophy this question divided philosophers into two main positions; empiricism and rationalism

EMPIRICISM: SENSES AS SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

- How do we know that water will revive a dropping plant?
- We say that we know by means of sensory organs, from our past experience
- Thus what we see, hear, touch, smell and test, that is our concrete experience constitutes the realm of knowledge.
- The philosophical position that stresses the role of perception or observation or senses as man's main source of knowledge is called **empiricism**
- In short empiricism maintains that we know what we have found out from our senses, and through experience, that is **posteriori**

PROBLEMS OF COMMONSENSE KNOWLEDGE

Philosophy is comparatively recent in man's long struggle to understand reality.

What is common sense?

Common sense is a broad term for the fund of opinions each member of a group is expected to have

How does it come about?

We are born into social groups that define our ways of acting, feeling and thinking, that shape our views about ourselves and our world.

As we grow up we acquire certain habits, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and memories that appear fairly reliable.

We form customs, and traditional ways of thinking and acting that we hardly question or doubt – these tend to hold people in line.

These ways of acting and thinking are usually passed on to the next generation through traditions, imitation or instructions

The emerging consciousness is then coupled with our sense experiences.

These ways of thinking and acting – common ways of looking at things are often referred to as common sense.

Critical Comments on Commonsense

- We never leave commonsense beliefs wholly behind us no matter our level of education
- Commonsense serves as a useful check against 'blind spots' some people develop through intensive specializations

-Specialization can be narrow – commonsense is unspecialized belief – inclusive of all areas of life – could be advantageous.

However, commonsense opinions can be;

-Superficially grounded

-Formed without careful and critical reflection

-Can lead people astray – cannot easily cope with new and unfamiliar situations

-Hence commonsense needs constant and careful re-examination.

Sense of Sight

- Tends to depend on a number of factors each of which tends to give a different picture of what we see. For example the colour of objects depends on whether we look at the object with the naked eye or coloured glasses
- May also depend on the intensity of the light
- Or whether we have normal sight or colour blind
- Or whether we see the object through the microscope or by the naked eye.

Sense of Touch

-The sense of touch tends to depend on how hard we press the object or alternatively, what part of the body presses the object.

-A philosopher, George Berkley once remarked that water may feel warm to one hand and cool to the other if when you plunge both hands into the same water one hand is warm the other is cool.

Sense of Sound

-The sense of hearing presents more or less the same kind of problems. For example if one is standing by a railway line and the whistling locomotive rushes past the pitch of the whistle tends to change depending on the proximity of the locomotive.

Senses of Smell and Taste

-These too are fraught with perceptual difficulties. They tend to be influenced by what we have just been eating and smelling. For example, cold may influence the taste of food, tea taken immediately after a pineapple may not taste the same.

APPEARANCE therefore largely constitutes knowledge or view of the world that we have gained spontaneously without much reflection, through commonsense and sense perception. The problem with this is that appearances can be:

1. **Relative**-vary from one person to the other, from time to time to the same person
2. **Deceptive**-can appear to be what they are not
3. **Unreliable** as our source of knowledge and judgment

-A critical thinker therefore ought to distinguish between appearance and reality

Why Must We Distinguish Between Appearance Reality?

- To detect deceptions
- To have a better understanding of world around us
- To make correct judgments – we often make wrong decision and judgments due to our inability to distinguish between appearance and reality e.g. advertisements, politics etc.
- To avoid being victims of conmen and women. The basic tool of a con person is to present appearance as if it were either truth or reality
- To detect dogmatic beliefs which greatly hinder our understanding of the world, such beliefs stop us from being inquisitive and rational – depend on blind faith e.g. doomsday cults
- To identify slogans and propaganda and treat them for what they are; slogans are catch phrases that are meant to mobilize people emotionally. They can be misleading, deceptive, detract people from real issues – hence lead people astray. They may make us make wrong decisions and arrive at incorrect conclusions.
- The capacity to distinguish between appearance and reality enhances our power to be open minded and see things more objectively