

Can I know the world I experience is real?

“The mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas." *John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.*

It's true that everything we encounter in life happens inside our brains. Everything I have experienced, my thoughts, feelings and sensory impressions has happened in *my* brain. What does this mean for us? An uncomfortable thought, perhaps one many of us have had around childhood, is that the world may be a dream. The external reality we perceive may only be seemingly real, weaved out of our own minds. It's unsettlingly easy to generate scepticism about the world around us, yet most of us shake these thoughts off and carry on with our lives. Why are we right to do so? Are we capable of knowing reality as it really is, or are we forced to live in subjective world?

The agenda for modern philosophy begins with the question ‘of what can we be certain?’ Rene Descartes knew that his senses could be deceived and therefore not trusted. He asks, ‘how can we know there is not an evil demon meddling with and manipulating our senses to deceive us?’ This is a difficult question to answer. Once we insist on rock solid foundations for knowledge and doubt everything we can possibly doubt, these foundations inevitably collapse, leaving us with Western Philosophy's most famous statement “I think, therefore I am” a translation of its Latin original *cogito ergo sum*. Of course, Descartes did not really believe there could be an evil demon deceiving us: he uses this to illustrate the difficulty of having absolute certainty in our beliefs. Unfortunately, this angle fails to secure us much

knowledge; certitude in our beliefs seems unachievable once we define knowledge as incompatible with the possibility of being wrong. In fact, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that knowledge and certitude as concepts do not entail each other: knowledge can be certain not simply by 'seeing' its truth, but when its truth is assumed among a community. In his words, "it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting which lies at the bottom of the language game."

What is meant by '*the world*'? Is it the material reality- the atoms, molecules, waves and forces that make up and govern existence, or is it the world of our human experience? We see only a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum, which is split up into colours. Similarly, we hear a limited range of vibrations from which we can interpret sound. We cannot take perception out of the equation. Take the colour red: the sensation we call 'redness' is not a property of an object; it is the property of the reaction we have with it. Likewise, we impose meanings of 'sound' onto vibrations that they do not have themselves. What does exist independently of our minds is a world of waves, particles and forces. Yet the view that the world is in reality silent and colourless ignores the dynamic reality which our sense experiences decode. Our perception is still communicating an image of the external world, and so it could be argued that the external world really is noisy and colourful, even more so than our experience suggests!

When we receive raw data from the external world, our sensory apparatus transforms this into sensation: our brain produces the experience for us. The sensory system simplifies the complexities of the world in the same way an icon on a computer screen simplifies the

underlying intricacy of its data. This means that we have never experienced the 'real' reality, only a subjective perception of the external world. How well do these subjective, internal images represent reality? Our perceptions of sense qualities exist because they have evolved over time: organisms that had the most informed senses had an evolutionary advantage. We do not experience full reality because our brains did not evolve to do so: there is no survival advantage in interpreting all the raw data underpinning the torrent of experience, indeed it would overwhelm us and require our brains to be even larger! However, it remains that our perception is a legitimate way of decoding and accessing reality. But how can we be sure of a real, objective reality if we have never experienced the world beyond our brain's interpretation of experience? The answer is: *we can't be sure*. Any assertion of a reality beyond direct experience is simply a belief.

It is important to consider that when we experience the world, we also conceptualise it. As Wittgenstein noted- there is no such thing as uninterpreted experience. In addition, we cannot experience the world in its entirety. The only reality you can know is the one you experience and interpret using the concepts you have available. Thoughts and concepts seem to draw a parallel with experience and perception: though they differ from each other, they are both attempts to engage with and represent reality. Hilary Putnam suggests that for words or ideas to have meaning, they are linked and limited to the experiences of what they represent; meaning is not intrinsic to concepts or words. Concepts can give us a sense of the reality it represents to the extent that it is caused by that reality.

But are we really in control of our thoughts? Tune into any sound in your environment at this moment. I will take the dripping tap in my kitchen, for example: I am not able to stop the sound, nor did I have anything to do with hearing it. It simply appears. It is likewise with your thoughts. You can listen in for a while and it seems as if you are producing your thoughts, yet they just appear in your consciousness, and you take yourself to be the producer of them. Some neuroscientists agree that it is our subconscious mind that decides what we do, whilst the conscious part spins out a narrative for why our subconscious has made these decisions: it is a fiction explaining our actions in the external world. In the late 6th century B.C.E., the Buddha claimed there is no 'I': the sense of self is an illusion. We would like to think that we are agents of our own experience, yet upon meditation, you would find that your thoughts, desires and feelings cannot be confirmed to be a single fixed 'you' as they come and go, replaced by a new wave all the time. On this basis it is right to have a degree of scepticism regarding our conceptualisation of the world. However, it remains that thoughts and concepts still have the capacity to illuminate reality and so enable us to navigate and understand it deeply.

So, can I know the world I experience is real? Perception seems to suggest so: our experiences connect to and give us understanding of the external world. Similarly, our thoughts and concepts must correspond to the reality behind them. By recognising the difference between our perceptions of reality, and reality itself, we can come closer to understanding its complex relationship: we can strive for a more truthful picture of the world.