



## WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHAT YOU GET

People regularly tell me to come to my senses, but the philosopher in me thinks we should run as far from our senses as we can.

To concentrate just on vision, our eyes deceive us all the time. A square tower may look round from a distance. Our bed sheets look spotless yet harbor more hungry dust mites than we want to know. The moon looks larger on the horizon than above us and yet it isn't. A straight stick in water looks bent. The sky looks blue when in fact it consists only of gas molecules which aren't themselves blue. Objects seem to move across the movie screen when all we're actually seeing is a rapid sequence of still pictures. And that dining room table we paid a month's salary for, for what looks like its solid cherry surface? In fact it's composed mostly of the empty space inside its atoms. Suckers!

Indeed the whole idea that our eyes can tell us how things really are doesn't make a lot of sense. Our perceptions are constantly varying, for one thing, without our having any basis for choosing one perception to be the "true" one. In fact (for example) I shouldn't have suggested above that the stick "really is" straight since even that information only comes from other conflicting perceptions. Instead we should just say that to our visual perception the stick *looks* crooked while to our tactile perception of it under the water *it feels* straight. There is no way of saying how things "really" are. We can only say how things appear to us in different circumstances.

Even more importantly, to tell that our visual perception of a thing is accurate we'd have to compare that perception with the thing itself. But how can we do *that*? Every time we look at the thing we only get another perception of it, and never the thing itself!

Things are simply not, in short, as the eyes have it. So next time you're told to come to your senses—say nay!



Look at this image. Is it an older person or a young person?

## THE EYEBALL OF THE BEHOLDER

A friend recently looked askance at my supper. “What?” I said. “It’s delicious.” “No it isn’t,” he replied. I didn’t continue this argument since yielding meant more supper for me. But I also didn’t continue because there’s nothing to argue about here.

Why not? Because how things taste, like other things we’ve seen, is relative. Whether two objects match in color; whether a room feels warm or cool; or whether someone is beautiful, all of these vary between perceivers and we can’t say any one perception is correct while the others are not. The features perceived here are subjective: not in the object but in the mind of the perceiver. Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder.

But now consider even the shape and size of an object. The coin in your hand looks round from straight on but looks oval from even a slight angle. From far away it looks small while from nearby it looks large. In all of these cases, a certain perceived quality varies between acts of perceiving while the object itself does not: it’s the same coin whether it looks round or oval, or small or large. But if the perceived quality varies while the object itself does not, then the perceived quality must not be in the object. So what you perceive with respect to shape and size, too, is subjective, i.e. a sensation within your mind. But it doesn’t stop here.

For what we perceive, in perceiving objects, are colors, tastes, sizes, shapes. And objects are nothing more than collections of colors, tastes, sizes, and shapes. If these latter are all just sensations in perceivers, then *so are the objects themselves*. Or to put it bluntly: It’s not merely that what we perceive are sensations in minds.

It’s that mental sensations are all there is.

So there are no genuinely physical objects. There are only minds and their sensations. It’s not just beauty that’s in the eye of the beholder, then: even the eyeball of the beholder is in the eye of the beholder.

## THERE'S ... SOMETHING ... OUT ... THERE

You know those ambiguous drawings—for example the one which looks like a young woman one way but like an old woman another way? It's tempting to wonder what that picture is of *in itself* so to speak. But of course the answer is neither, or both: it depends on how you, the perceiver, sees it.

But so does everything else.

Compare the difference between hearing a language you understand and one you don't. When you hear English you hear words or maybe even meanings; when you hear Urdu you hear only sounds. But the difference is not in your ears. Rather it's in your mind, which can interpret the former sounds and not the latter.

Similarly my cat will look at my computer and not see a computer. When he spreads out on my desk he sees neither the important papers he is pushing over the edge nor my annoyance as I push *him* over the edge. The problem isn't that he is blind. The problem is that he lacks the relevant concepts: computer, papers, etc. At most what he sees is something like a pattern of lights and colors. His limited mind cannot interpret those patterns as we who have these concepts do.

Indeed we fail to appreciate how much work our own minds do in constructing our experience of the world. The "objective" world supposedly consists of stable physical objects which have their properties "in themselves," independent of anyone's perceiving them. But your sensory experience actually gives you no such thing! What your eyes "see" strictly speaking is that vast fluctuating array of lights and colors. It's your mind, applying its concepts, which interprets those patterns—which sees them *as* a breakfast table, a banana on the floor, and the kids' dirty sneakers.

I'm not saying that there is no world outside our minds. There is; but what that world *is*, the precise objects it contains, is in some sense "up to us," up to how we, with whatever concepts we may have, interpret our sensations. Just as "what" you see when you look at an ambiguous image depends on how you look at it, so too, in other words, does what you see anywhere else. There is indeed *something* out there—but *what* it is, exactly, depends on just who's perceiving it.