

OUR LIMITED
PERCEPTION
IN RELATION TO
SELF-IMAGE

ANNA F.



What is the influence of our limited perception? Our senses only give us a very narrow scope of the world around us, and are easily manipulated. Descartes found that the only belief that can be proven from our restricted perception is that “I” exist; “I think, therefore I am.” Our sensory organs are the barrier between our mind and the external world, so we interact with our (possibly nonexistent) surroundings indirectly. Can we trust our limited perception to correctly view ourselves physically? Since beauty is subjective, how I view myself could be different from how somebody else views me. Berkeley states, “To be is to be perceived.” Nothing can exist if there is no one perceiving it. If we cannot directly observe how we are acquiring our senses, how can we make any claims about the external world, including our bodies? The flaws and positive attributes we notice about our bodies are only present because we imagine them to be there. We hold physical form and our conception of that form is wholly mental. How does our perception and reality interact if they are not in the same system? Can beauty be physical and mental? If so, can beauty help overlap these two dimensions?

My intention is for the viewer’s focus to be on the figure’s reflection. The reflection morphs her appearance, but how different is her reflection from her direct image? How does she see herself versus how do we see her? I want to call into question our perception, and to push people to come to the conclusion that perception is not objective, especially towards ourselves.

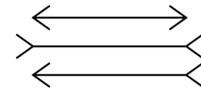
Anna F

This work is directed towards audiences with a keen interest in philosophical inquiry. What is the influence of our limited perception? Our senses only give us a very narrow scope of the world around us, and they are easily manipulated. We are not able to prove anything besides our existence from our restricted perception. Can we trust our limited perception to correctly view ourselves? How do our mental ideas relate to the physical outside world?

I scan my eyes across the cafeteria and make eye contact with an attractive stranger. I nervously look down and pull my skirt down as far as it will go. It's junior year, and I'm wearing the same skirt I used to wear in seventh grade. Except, it doesn't fit me now. I know it's the skirt I used to wear back then because of the charcoal stain on the bottom right. Remembering how I used to have to roll it up because it fit so loose, I suck my stomach in so the button won't pop. The lunch line is awfully slow today, so I slyly pull out my phone to pass the time. I remember when I was a small seventh grader, and I could hide from the teachers behind a tall eighth grader. We aren't allowed to be on our phones in school, just like we're not allowed to buzz our heads. But I did that, didn't I? The day I cut my hair I suddenly lost the attention I used to get from the guys in my grade. They must all think I'm going through a phase or something. I wonder if any of them even just considered that all I wanted was a change. I wasn't trying to change who I was, I was just sick of my long locks always being in the way. I click on the photos app; it takes me half a lifetime to scroll to 2012- my seventh grade school year. Clicking on a picture of me with my seventh grade crush, I take a big gulp. I was happy, carefree even. He was handsome and tall, and he was looking at me. I turn my attention to the slender blonde girl standing next to him: me. I looked normal, like I could fit in with all the rest of the girls in my grade. I had clear skin, skinny legs, and long, shiny hair. Am I romanticising myself? Probably. But compared to Anna today, she was a catch. I guess that was back when I was still trying to convince myself that I was just like everyone else. Shaking the image out of my head, I pick up my food and hurry to get a seat at the lunch table. Eating is a blur; I've already forgotten about my insecurities and am busy laughing uncontrollably with my friends. I can drop my diffidence when I'm around my friends; they respect me and know exactly who I am without prejudicing from my appearance. After lunch, I head to class and make awkward conversation with the boy sitting next to me. It's great to be reminded again of my insecurities. After another class and softball practice, I get home around seven-thirty. After peeling my dirt and sweat filled clothes off my body, I take a long look in the mirror. How different I look today than four years ago. Countless years of pitching have given me broad, masculine shoulders. My long legs are not longer an attribute- my thick thighs and calves stand out more. I'm flat chested, and my hair is short. I no longer blame strangers when they call me "Sir." I hear that people think I'm "intimidating," and just the other day, I heard that a teacher told his class I could beat up Royce, a boy who's taller than I am. Was that supposed to be a compliment? I ask my closest friends and family to be honest with me about my appearance, and they always give me the answer I want, but the one I don't trust. Are they lying to protect me? Do I see myself the way other people see themselves? Can I trust my senses when viewing myself?

Rene Descartes was the first to question perception; he was one of the first to pave the way for questioning the Catholic Church's teachings. The Catholic Church was a powerful presence in the mid-1600's, and it used threats of torture to keep Aristotle's ideas central. For example, Galileo was forced to renounce his support of the heliocentric solar system. Descartes introduced the concept of epistemology, how we differentiate facts from opinions. Our beliefs are determined by our perception of ourselves, ideas, and the external world. But can we be sure that what we perceive is true? Descartes was a skeptic; he introduced the possibility that everything we think we know is false. A skeptic is inclined to doubt all accepted opinions. Descartes used a process called systematic doubt, where one doubts the truth of one's beliefs. His process of systematic doubt is introspective and based off of his own experiences and thoughts. However, the process is also objective and logical. Skepticism is questioning every belief; everyone's beliefs are based off of his or her circumstances, and everyone's

circumstances are different. Therefore, not all beliefs are universally correct. Descartes said, “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” Skepticism centrally asserts that we cannot know or prove any “truth.” Different societies and time periods have had different standards and expectations for individuals. Is beauty objective? Is how I view myself different from how somebody else views me? Are there any beliefs that are accurate? Is there such a thing as perfection? My idea of perfection is different from other people’s ideas of perfection, so is anyone correct?



All of our subjective beliefs are based off of other beliefs, which are based off of other beliefs, etc. This belief system cannot go on forever; the beliefs must be based off basic beliefs that are self justified. This theory is called *foundationalism*. Descartes reasoned that he would not have to question every belief; he could just examine the fundamental beliefs that



form the foundation of all other beliefs. In his words, “There is nothing more ancient than the truth.” In theory, he would be left with only a handful of sturdy, clear, and self providing basic beliefs. He started by questioning perception. The senses cannot truly be trusted, and we have a lot of optical illusions. For example, in 1889, Franz Carl Muller-Lyer, a German sociologist, devised the Muller-Lyer illusion to demonstrate how two lines can look different lengths when, in actuality, they are identical. In addition, we cannot always trust our sense of touch. For example, if one puts his hand under cold water, then moves it to lukewarm water, the lukewarm water feels hot. Although, when one puts his hand under hot water, then moves it to the same lukewarm water, the lukewarm water feels cold. Also, dreams are often times very realistic. Could it be possible that we are dreaming right now? We could even be on drugs and not aware of it. There is a chance that God or an evil demon is tricking us into having beliefs that are not correct. Moving deeper, that demon could just be a figment of our imagination. Everything we perceive and feel could just be an impulse being put into our brains by some other being; thus, it is possible that we are not even interfacing with the external world. Since no sense is trustworthy, core truths must be corroborated independent from all sensory experiences. Descartes found that all beliefs cannot be proven except one: “I exist.” I must exist because by questioning my existence, I am included in the act of questioning. The one belief Descartes was able to prove without using perception was “Cogito Ergo Sum,” which means “I think, therefore I am.” From this, he concluded that our minds are spiritual and eternal, and our bodies are material and temporary. Descartes found answers to many of his questions, but he also left some important questions. He was not clear on how the mind and body interact. What is the connection between our minds and our bodies? What is distinctive about human consciousness? Can we ever be absolutely certain? Is there anything certain that we know about our physical selves? Our opinions of ourselves may be based off of completely inaccurate data, or data that does not even exist. We can only understand ourselves through our sensory experiences. It can be comforting to ponder the possibility that the circumstances we exist in are not even real. The people surrounding me could just be a figment of my imagination, and my senses are being manipulated. My mind could just be being fed sensory impulses, and I could not be experiencing anything directly. I compare myself intellectually to those around me, but I could be comparing myself to nothing. My stress for not meeting beauty standards could just be impulses being fed into my brain. Why try to set any goals at all if this is a possibility?

While Descartes was the first modern philosopher, John Locke, a British Empiricist, soon came after with his own ideas, contrary to both the church and Descartes. He founded the idea of

Tabula Rasa, meaning “blank slate.” He differs from Descartes in the fact that he believes we interact with an external world. What he questioned was how we interact with it and perceive it. Locke has confidence in the idea that people are born as blank slates, and they only understand the world through their senses. Essentially, he believes that we are shaped by our experiences. This theory is called empiricism. Descartes thinks we are born with natural ideas that God gave us, but Locke disagrees. He believes, “No man’s knowledge here can go beyond his experience.” Differences in culture indicate we are not all born with identical ideas; we would be able to pinpoint those ideas if they were identical because God would want us to identify them. All our ideas about the external world originate from our senses, but we do not realize how far removed we are from the external world. Our sensory organs are the barrier between our mind and the physical world, so we experience everything indirectly. Our sole direct experiences are sensory ideas, but they are only interpretations of the external world. Those interpretations can be influenced easily by other factors -- everything that can be perceived can be perceived differently. John Locke was interested in figuring out what we know about objects separate from any subjective qualities. The subjective qualities he found were color, sound, taste, smell, and touch because every person (or species) can experience them differently. According to *The Cartoon Introduction to Philosophy*, the objective qualities that Locke found were “wavelengths of light, frequency of air pressure changes, shape of molecules to which the taste buds are exposed, shape of molecules to which the olfactory nerves are exposed, and arrangement of molecules into surface shapes; kinetic energy of atoms (temperature).” These physical qualities remain the same, and they are called “primary qualities.” When I look in the mirror or see a photograph of myself, my eyes could be interpreting my image differently than anyone else. Also, the camera skews image proportions a significant amount. It is converting a three-dimensional image into a two-dimensional image. It is also easier for me to point out my flaws in photographs because it is a still image. Other people do not notice the flaws as much because they see me in motion. I may think that I look very different in photographs because my face is flipped, in contrast to when I look at myself in the mirror. As soon as I notice something is off, I think it means something is wrong. I start to notice how different my face looks in photographs compared to how I usually see myself in the mirror because my face is flipped. All I notice is that something is different, but I cannot put my finger on what is wrong.

George Berkeley disagrees with Locke. Berkeley agrees with Idealism; he refuses to believe that we have indirect grasp of the outside world. We have an idea of the external world without having actual contact with it. Locke believes that we are imperceptive to the outside world, and the sole direct experiences we have with anything are ideas that come from our interpretations of the world. Berkeley inquires that if we cannot even directly observe how we are acquiring our senses, then how could we possibly make any claims about the external world? “Esse est percipi,” or “To be is to be perceived.” Paraphrasing Descartes, how do we know we aren’t just being supplied sensory data? Locke could be right about us having a relationship with an external world, but there is no way to demonstrate the existence of it. If the external world is a physical system, and we only experience ideas, which are mental processes, then how can the two very different things interact with each other? In other words, how can something physical cause something mental? A causal relationship doesn’t have to require similarity between cause and effect, but to speak of them together, they must first be in the same system of reality. In other words, in order for causal relationships to exist, they must interact in the same dimension. How can I make mental judgements of my physical appearance? How can I think anything at all about my physical body? I compare myself to others without even truly knowing myself. I’ve only ever

looked at myself from a mirror or in a photograph. I have never watched myself interact with the world from another point of view. Other people could view me completely different than how I view myself.

Berkeley also disagrees with Locke about objects having primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley thinks that some of Locke's primary qualities can change depending on location, placement, and other factors. If we take away all subjective sensory experiences, then nothing is left over. Though Locke and Berkeley differ in most aspects, they share similar views on language. Their understandings of perception versus physical realities help us understand how languages are essentially just associating words with sensory ideas. Those sounds, which when alone are abstract and meaningless, can be associated with objects by a community. It is then that a spoken language begins. The same goes for written language; we associate a certain noise with marks. We can associate words with ideas to make them meaningful, but that implies that some utterances cannot have meaning. For example, since words allude only to ideas, there is no way that they can allude to non-ideas like mind-independent physical objects. All objects, besides the philosopher, are solely a collection of ideas. For example, a chair cannot exist as a Lockean object in a Berkeleian world. It is only a body of ideas collected by the senses. The eyes obtain a visual of the chair and the skin detects pressure and texture. Therefore, the chair is only a group of ideas. We can know that a chair is in the room, whether we are looking at the chair or not. However, we can only say that the chair is in the room because we are only imagining the chair. We need to take away all observers, even imaginary ones, including ourselves. Thus, there is no chair because no one, including ourselves, can imagine it. Therefore, Locke's physical objects are nonexistent. I cannot even know for sure that I am a physical being. For all I know, I am just a mind. When I look in the mirror or at a photograph of myself, all I am seeing is my senses' interpretation of the external world. What stumped Berkeley was that he did not understand what could cause our ideas of sensory experiences. He at first thought that it was his mind because that's where all of his ideas exist. After careful consideration, however, he realized that his mind is not powerful enough to come up with all the ideas he has. The source must be some great, powerful being- God. Berkeley states, "From my own being, and from the dependency I find in myself and my ideas, I do, by an act of reason, necessarily infer the existence of a God, and of all created things in the mind of God."

Our limited perception keeps us from being objective; society develops standards that many of us feel like we need to conform to. Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley teach us to be skeptical of our surroundings. Skepticism, Empiricism, and Idealism are all separate ways to view our perceptions. We have such concrete goals that we want to live up to, but we forget to live our own lives. Beauty standards, in particular, create so much stress that overpowers our joy of being ourselves. We want to live up to what we think society expects when, in truth, every part of society expects something different. We hardly get to know ourselves because we spend so much time trying to be somebody else. I see myself as an insecure girl who cannot be fully content with her physical self. I look in the mirror and see outrageously thick thighs and flabby arms. However, when I see a picture of myself, I see somebody completely different. My jaw line disappears and the left side of my face shifts upward about a centimeter. Today's beauty standards are unattainable; many people want what they do not have. Most of the models we see in magazines and want to look like are unrealistic. They spend hours having makeup applied and put in the right lighting. After the photos are taken, they get Photoshopped to accentuate certain features. Everyone has a different standard for beauty, and beauty standards have been constantly evolving throughout history. It comes from how we grew up and our circumstances. We think

that we all have to agree on what is beautiful, but that is not realistic. We need to challenge the beliefs that we hold in order to make progress. Is there an idea of beauty that we can all agree on? Can beauty be physical and mental? If so, can beauty help overlap these two dimensions?

Bibliography

- Adler, Mortimer J., editor. *Immanuel Kant*. 2nd ed., U of Chicago, 1990. 60 vols.
- The Art Story Contributors. "Op Art." *The Art Story*, 2017, www.theartstory.org/movement-op-art.htm. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.
- Guter, Eran. *Aesthetics A-Z*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2010. 13 vols.
- Moseley, Alexander. *A to Z of Philosophy*. New York, Continuum, 2008.
- Olson, Robert G. *A Short Introduction to Philosophy*. Mineola, Dover Books, 1967.
- Patton, Michael F., and Kevin Cannon. *The Cartoon Introduction to Philosophy*. New York, Hill and Wang, 2015.
- Ponty, Merleau. *The World of Perception*. Routledge, Routledge Classics, 1948.
- Robinson, Dave, and Judy Groves. *Philosophy a Graphic Guide to the History of Thinking*. Thriplow, Icon Books, 2007.
- Warburton, Nigel. "If a Tree Falls in the Forest and Nobody Is There to Hear It, Does It Make a Sound?" *BBC Radio 4*, 3 Aug. 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02yq1b9. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.
- "Rene Descartes- 'I Think, Therefore I Am.'" *BBC Radio 4*, 17 Apr. 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02pdc6n. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.