

Topic number: 4

## **Introduction**

René Magritte once drew a picture of a pipe and wrote:

*Ceci n'est pas un pipe.*

Indeed it was not a pipe. It was a canvas of smeared pigment that reflected light of different wavelengths in different places. It was a picture of a pipe. Another picture, this time of a picture of a pipe- that is not a pipe, either. And if we looked, "in reality," at a pipe- would *that* be a pipe? Or yet another picture of a pipe? A picture that our eyes give us? How many picture frames must we transcend before the pipe becomes a pipe?

Perhaps you turn to the person besides you and ask if it is a pipe. (Or perhaps you ask a completely different question, if she is seeing a pipe.) She might say yes. You might go further on and ask if the pipe is brown. She might say no, because she is color-blind and sees everything in shades of gray.

So we question, as did Sextus Empiricus thousands of year before us, whether the underlying object is such as it appears, and also question the appearance (existence) itself.

## **Part I : We perceive things differently**

Locke also asked this question. Perhaps simplistically, he divided perception into that which can be questioned and that which cannot: primary qualities and secondary qualities. The former consisted of such things that can be "objectively" measured, such as size and weight. The latter consisted of such things as taste, color, smell.

The fact that secondary qualities can be questioned is indubitable. It is said that there is no way to know what other people are seeing and how they see them because we cannot go into the minds of others, but there are ways to objectively ascertain that the reality we perceive is different through scientific measurement. For instance, the Himba people of Africa see color in a different way from people of the Western world. They have two words for two (to the non-Himba, slightly) different colors, both of which the non-Himba call green. *Buru* is a word that the Himba use to refer to colors that for us are green and blue. *Zambu* is another type of green. If the non-Himba who use the color

system common in the West are asked to choose the unique square among nine buru-colored squares and one zambu-colored square, they will be slow to realize which color is different from the rest. But the Himba will do it very easily. On the other hand, if the Himba are asked to pick out a green square in a group of nine blue squares and one green, colors which are both *buru* to them, they will take a longer time.

The discovery of the Himba people's color perception came centuries after Locke's time, but he would not have been surprised by it. It fits in with his theory of secondary and primary qualities, because secondary qualities are different for everyone. But are primary qualities? Locke, in his time, would never have doubted that primary qualities are always the same. The rock may be gray for a color blind person and invisible to a blind person, but it is still a rock, and it has the same mass to everyone.

But even this is not true. According to the rules of relativity, an object or person that is moving has a greater mass and experiences time more slowly, from the viewpoint of someone who is standing still. This fact has been proved by scientific experiments. Modern science, then, has toppled even the primary qualities from the pedestal upon which Locke placed them.

The point of mentioning relativity and the inconsistency of mass is not to prove that every single thing is different for every single person. Proving *that* would require a futile survey that could never be carried out in the real world and never completed- but to show that all perception can be questioned, and that the experience of reality is a remarkably subjective thing.

## **Part II : The external world exists, and is responsible for (incomplete) perception**

The different perceptions of the Himba and non-Himba are drastic cases but illustrate the fact that smaller differences may exist even in people of similar cultures. After all, people have different genes, and even two people who grow up in the same environment- twins who grow up together, for instance- experience life differently. Perception is different for everyone, even people with the “same” kind of senses.

The cause of perception is the external world. The Stoic Chrysippus once said that an uncaused cause would destroy the cosmos. The possibility of something spontaneously happening without a reason is incongruous with our very basic system of logic, and therefore there must be something that causes perception. And this is reality. Moreover, since the perception of reality is different for everyone, we must conclude that the reality we perceive is an incomplete picture of it. Moving from Magritte's pipe to the truth of reality: *ceci n'est pas la réalité*. And because it would be nonsensical to claim that one person sees reality in a complete and accurate way and that all others experience variations of it with

various degrees of error, *all* human beings (and indeed, all beings with sense perception) experience a world that is a distorted fragment of the true reality.

Because there must be a reason for our perception, there is a reality, and because we experience it differently, we must perceive reality incompletely.

### **Part III : Refining the proof: existence and sentience of myself and others**

The truth of this claim, however, is contingent on several things- that I exist, that other people exist as sentient beings, and that they give accurate accounts of reality.

#### *a) Do I exist?*

In the same way I concluded that there must be an external world because something causes my perception (if we questioned even the fact that everything must have a cause, logic crumbles and so does philosophy itself), Descartes- centuries before- concluded that he existed because he thought. Over the years, however, even this has been questioned. The possibility has been raised that there may be no *I*, and the thoughts I think might exist by themselves without a thinker.

Yet I argue against this because I cannot separate myself from my thoughts. I am my thoughts, just as the world is my perception of it and not reality. *Cogito*: in one word, the concept "I think". The thoughts cannot be separated from the thinker. Even if there are countless ideas in the universe that have yet to be realized by a sentient being, it is only after they collide with consciousness that they are able to be articulated. Even if there are thoughts, *in potentia*, without thinkers, there cannot be thinkers without thought, by definition. *Ergo sum*.

Moreover, I cannot simply dismiss my existence (and my sentience) because of *qualia*. If the world was a vast collection of interacting forces and nothing more, as would be the case if I denied my sentience, there would be no *qualia*. If nothing existed beyond the physical description of the universe, the physical collision of a honey molecule and my olfactory receptors, and the neurological chain reaction that follows, would be the same thing as the sensation the collision and reaction produce. And yet it is not. Because it is not, there is something more to the universe than a collection of colliding pieces of mass and force: an interpretive being that perceives the world as something other than its physical form. And that is sentience.

#### *b) But are the other people I perceive sentient?*

Searle's Chinese room thought experiment goes something like this:

A man who does not speak, write, or understand Chinese has a comprehensive manual of instructions on what to do when cards with Chinese characters on them are slipped under the door of his room. With every card he receives, he will check his manual to see which character he must draw and send out in reply. The person outside does not know what is happening inside the room. For all she knows, it is a man who speaks Chinese who is answering her.

I do not know, and will never know for certain, if the seven billion or so other people in the world are sentient like me, or are Chinese rooms. If they are Chinese rooms, the accounts of different sense perception they give me are false. If they are Chinese rooms, the Himba people do not see color differently, but only appear to, and all my conclusions are unreliable.

However I reject this proposition because people are not like machines. Even the complexity of the best computers and machines we have devised fall very, very short of the complexity of action and unpredictability of an unintelligent dog. Operating within the confines of our knowledge- as we must- we conclude that people are not Chinese rooms.

The less things act like us, the less sentience we ascribe to them. What seems like me in one aspect must be similar to me in another. This is a faulty assumption if I use one aspect to illustrate it- just because my eyes are the same color of a dog's does not mean I will mindlessly chase after a ball when someone throws it. But a hundred similarities? A thousand? More? If I perceive another person who, like me, can solve an algebra problem, flinches at the sound of chalk screeching against a board, has ten fingers, has hair that grows, displays pain when physically struck, drowns in water, cannot fly... and so forth... then I will assume that all these countless similarities likely prove that this person is also similar to me in one final, vital aspect: that we are sentient.

*c) Do they give me accurate accounts of reality?*

In the same method of logic that allows me to presume that, since we share countless similarities that cannot be ascribed to coincidence, we must also share another, I presume that most people, like I, have an interest in telling the truth to facilitate the uncovering of a philosophical truth, or at least an interest in the material incentive often offered by researchers in exchange for accurate data.

#### **Part IV : We will never know reality**

I exist, and am sentient. Other people exist, and are also sentient. The variation in our experiences and perception of the world suggests that the world we perceive is incomplete and subjective, although the

fact that our perceptions cannot exist without cause suggests that reality is not an illusion. It is real, merely ungraspable because of the limitations of our senses.

My perception of reality is different from that of a blind man, or that of a person with synesthesia- a condition that blends a person's sense perception and allows him or her to, say, hear color or smell music. According to modern science, there are eleven dimensions in the universe- seven space dimensions that we, who perceive only three axes in space (up-down, left-right, back-forth) cannot intuitively understand, and the dimension of time. What if we suddenly gained senses that allowed us to intuit these dimensions? The world, for us, would be fundamentally altered. Although the physical reality would not change, the subjective world would. The human being is like a boy in a metal box with holes in it, through which different colored lights leak. Depending on the size, shape, and placement of the holes, the boy will see a different world. But it is not only that- there are strangely shaped prisms outside the holes (although the boy does not know) so that the colors are warped and refracted. This is the world to the boy. In this metaphor, the visual image of the outside world is reality, the holes are senses.

Trapped in our metal boxes, we will never truly know reality. Yet the metal box is part of our existence, an aspect of our being. To rid ourselves of it- even if it were possible- would be to shuck off a large part of who we are. To live and be sentient is to perceive, and to perceive is to be limited. There is no tragedy in that.

### **Conclusion: On the essence of honey, no longer a matter of doubt**

...Stickiness on the fingers.

...A configuration of atoms that is viscous and has high adherence to other materials, stimulates the taste buds of human beings, and binds to the olfactory receptors when introduced to the nose

...A semitransparent liquid that reflects light somewhere around 750 nanometers in wavelength- a color we call yellow.

...Or perhaps another color to the Himba people.

...Sweetness.

...*Ineffability.*