

The Nature of Knowledge

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All knowledge is illusion! By this statement I am not meaning put down knowledge nor promote magic, but I do believe it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge base. If we do not remember our fundamental premises, we may astound ourselves with pronouncements which do nothing more than restate these premises. Let me explain what I mean by knowledge being illusion and how I arrive at this conclusion.

I accept as axiomatic the existence of "reality," that is, the essence of the universe, reality, exists independently of the existence of sentient observers. I believe this is the common operating axiom of most people, and as such, may seem to be trivial. However, this is not the only viable premise of the nature of the universe.

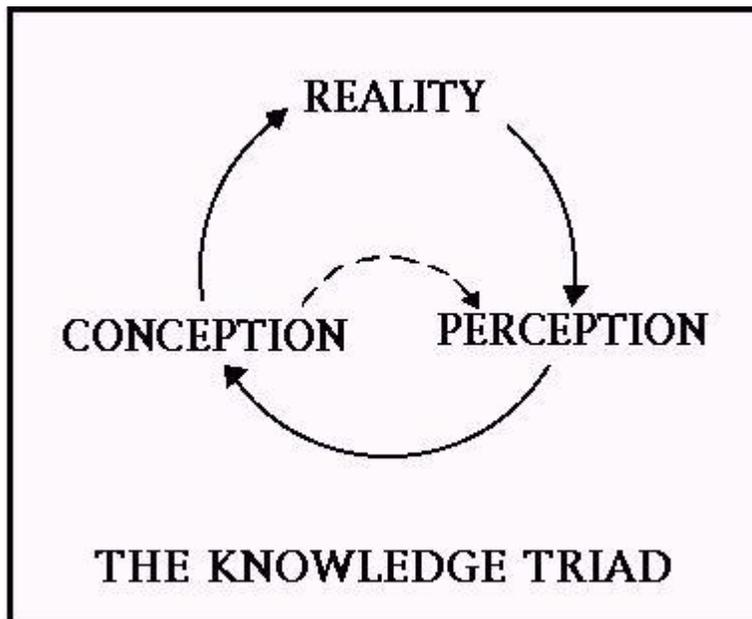
Probably the first operating premise we learn is that what is perceived is "real." Seeing is believing. This axiom has a long history in human thought. For example, the "Doubting Thomas" story in the Bible is an application of this premise. Although the advent of modern technology has "shown" us that many perceptions may not be "real," this premise still has a strong hold in modern society. For example, a corollary to this premise is touted more and more frequently today --it's not what you do that counts, but what people think you do. This "perception is all important" philosophy may be well suited to sales, but I hope the mechanics servicing the next airliner I ride do not subscribe to this premise. "Virtual reality" can help us understand information, but "virtual maintenance" would be a disaster.

In most of science, the perception premise has been replaced or severely modified. Most scientists seek to describe reality by using perceived observations to develop generalized concepts. Initially, our perceptions were limited to our natural senses: sight, hearing, and touch. Today we have many more means of perception, such as CAT scans, MRI, radio telescopes, voter polls, etc. With the growth of our conceptual knowledge, we developed the premise of the existence of "truth" and "reality" which can be known by sifting and analyzing "observations" (perceived information).

In physics, the premise of reality existing independently of sentient observers, is known as "classical" theory. Most of the perceived knowledge near the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century was closely related to our natural senses. According to science historians, physicists were so pleased with themselves at this time they declared there was nothing more to learn. Of course, today we know this was arrogant boasting. (Presuming that mass media worked then much like it does now, I would surmise that much of this boasting was media hype. I seriously doubt that many scientists at that time would be so limited in their horizons to believe that all the basic laws of the universe were known.)

The study of nuclear physics led to observations which were not readily explained with concepts developed under classical theory. (I believe it is important to note that these new observations were only indirectly based upon our natural senses. We can not see, hear, or touch nuclear particles. We postulate their presence based upon interpretative concepts of measured data.) To explain these observations, the "modern theory" of physics was developed. The "Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle" dictated that only statistical interpretations can be used. This principle has been paraphrased to state that the act of observation affects the observation. Further, because of the nature of these observations, only sentient beings can perceive them. Therefore, this principle means that "reality" does not exist independent of the sentient observer.

As I said starting out, I prefer the classical theory over the modern theory. Certainly, my preference is greatly influenced by the fact that I do not work or perform research in particle or quantum physics. So why do I believe that knowledge is illusion. It's really quite simple. Consider the figure below:



In this figure, "reality" is that quality of the universe which exists independent of the sentient observer. Perception is the information conveyed to the observer (or the observer's surrogate) through the senses or indirectly through interpretations of measured or sensed data. Conception is the corrolation and generalization of perceptions which exists in the mind of the observer. Knowledge consists of the collection of perceptions and conceptions. In this model, knowledge is clearly not reality. It is only a model of reality. We can know what a chair looks like to us, what it feels like to sit in, and and what its function is. However, our knowledge is not the chair. The more we perceive and conceive about the chair, the better is our model of the chair. Therefore, knowledge is not real; it is illusion. The greater our knowledge, the better the illusion. The chair is the chair, despite the state of our knowledge of the chair.

Notice in the above figure the dashed arrow from conception to perception. This feedback is fundamental to the theory of knowledge. What it means is that perception cannot occur without conception. If the observer has no conception to associate with a perception, perception will not occur. Perception is different from reaction. For example, a being can react to a stimulus without perception of the stimulus. A billiard ball will react to the impact from another ball without any perception or conception occurring. Similarly a living creature, such as a bacterium or a fish, can react to a stimulus without perception or conception. We humans, who are the most sentient beings known, react with our autonomous nervous systems to stimuli which we do not perceive.

Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose a short duration sound which you have never heard before occurs near you. I expect that the first time this occurs, you will not consciously perceive the sound. As far as you know, the sound never occurred. Only with repeated exposure would you begin to perceive the sound, first associating it with the general concept of noise and subsequently associating it with sound qualities and potential sources.

This model of the dependence of perception upon conception has some interesting spinoffs. Someone once said that we can only learn what we already know. My interpretation of what this means is that we must be repeatedly exposed to new information and ideas so that we develop concepts upon which we can attach knowledge before we perceive that we have learned something. This model also helps explain why we often mull information and concepts over and over in our minds before suddenly seeing the answer clearly in front of us. Many times in science we conceive the existence of things or responses before we ever observe them.

As a final comment on the illusory nature of knowledge, I believe that any theory of knowledge is valid to the extent that it helps us understand the universe. It would be highly unlikely that any single theory of knowledge is "correct." The pursuit of a single, unified theory of the universe is a desirable goal, but one which is futile and unnecessary.

End

<http://neoperceptions.com/futureperspective/futpers.htm>