

When should we trust the senses to give us truth?

Theory of Knowledge Essay

1,460 Words



To trust the senses means to have the justified belief that what they are conveying to the perceiver at that moment is in fact 'true'. In order to really understand in which circumstances it is viable for us to trust the senses, we will need first to define the concept of 'truth' and then to compare situations where they have most definitely been true to situations where the most certainly have not; i.e. when the senses have pointed in another direction. Then, from this comparison we should be able to define clearly when it is that we should place trust in the senses to give us truth, and when we should not trust them.

First of all, what is it that we mean by 'truth' when we talk of sensations? 'Truth' of what?

If I were to ask two people various questions, I would judge how correct their answers were according to how 'truthful' they are, i.e. if they avoid contradiction, are found by logical reasoning etc. For example I might ask "what is the diameter of the sun?" One might say that it seems to only be a centimeters across, while the other might answer that it is approximately 1.4 million kilometers across. We would consider the second answer correct, or true, even though it does not compliment what our direct sense perceptions tell us. What needs to be noted is that we as such are referring to the external world when we speak of truth; to what extent what they tell us is 'true', or correct. As such the essay question is referring to the difference between the instances where the senses have been proven to be truthful and those where they have been un-truthful, giving us a false understanding of the external world. Hopefully with this understanding we will be able to identify by what means we can know when to trust what the senses are telling us, and when not.

One argument might be that I can trust them to be true is when they all coincide with one another, or confirm one another. For example, if I take a ball my perception tells me that it is round, as do my hands. I can throw to the floor, thus hearing and seeing it bounce. Surely nothing else is required to confirm that this object exists and conforms to the definition of 'ball'. One objection to this argument is that in dreams while all my sense-data seem to confirm one another, many may be entirely un-truthful. I may dream seeing my feet trudging through snow, hear the wind howling, feel the coldness of my environment only to realize that I left the window open.

It seems that the one sense was true to tell me that my environment was cold, whereas the others were completely false. This case is an excellent example because it provides us with a correct perception and a false one. Therefore I must ask how, given that I am in a dream-state, am I to differentiate between senses that give us truth of the outside world and those that do not? (Similarly many other dreams all my sense-data may confirm one another, but upon waking prove that it is all completely false. The same question is relevant.)

Before giving my own opinion on the question, let us consider another important point. We as human beings have five senses. Why do we not have three, or ten? Darwin's theory of evolutionism tells us that with time man has evolved into what he is now because it ensures his survival. Other animals may have similar senses to him which may be heightened, such as hawks' ability to see great distances, or completely different, such as the bat's ability to somehow 'hear' his surroundings by means of his screeching. As such man's senses are what have kept him alive all this time. Surely the fact that we have survived this long by means of our senses means that what we receive by their means has great authority for the truth of the external world? So why is that we distrust them?

 To take a personal example, when I visited my father in his office on the 27th floor of a building and looked outside I saw that it was snowing. Therefore, once I got to the ground floor again I assumed I would find snow on the ground. However once I got outside I saw that it was actually raining. I had assumed that, because my perception told me that it was snowing outside, that the temperature at that high altitude was the same as on the ground.

This example serves to highlight clearly my opinion on the matter. It is not enough that we turn our focus to the sense-data itself in order to answer the essay question. We need to step back and try to understand the situation itself before trusting the senses to give us absolute truth. This is why we were deceived into trusting the senses during a dream; because we didn't analyze the possibility that at that moment we might be dreaming at that moment and argue its possibility (such arguments however exceed the bounds of this essay). This is also why we were deceived into thinking that the sun is only a few centimeters across; because we did not consider the nature of perspective. It is a question of contemplating the situation in order to verify the conclusions that our sense data lead us to.

I think that it is because science takes a similar methodology that it has become such a great authority on knowledge and truth concerning the external world. Science tries to analyze objects that it encounters not simply on its own, but within the context of everything else that has been studied: when studying the speed of a block falling down a ramp, our understanding of geometry and gravitation come into play when trying to make an explanation. Explanations are taken to be 'fact' until falsified, meaning that as soon as there is a rupture, as soon as a contradiction in the situation then we know not to place trust in any definitions or perceptions until all possible variables are considered and a logical definition is presented. The situation, the context of what perceptions we are investigating need to be considered thoroughly as well.

 Some may counter-argue that the personal example is not entirely relevant because it emphasizes the false assumption that I made. However such assumptions are relevant to any other times when the senses have proven to be truthful or not. When I step outside I may feel and perceive droplets dropping from the sky, and as such make an assumption that it is raining based upon the sense data I receive. However, by contemplating the situation I am able to look around and see that it's just the sprinkler that has been left on.

 Another reproach that may be made to my argument is the possible case that all my sense perceptions are in fact false, as in the case of mental illness, or our everyday perceived existence. How do I know the keyboard upon which I am currently typing 'really' exists? Could it not be a false sense perception deceiving me into believing it exists? There is no possibility for us to observe the environment and notice any reason to doubt the sense data we receive. This question leads to a questioning not of single parts of the physical world, but its entirety. However my manner of first analyzing the situation is again relevant. For example, if everything I hear and see in the world is merely a construct or untrue, why is it possible for me to learn from it? I go to school everyday and in, for example, physics classes I learn about such strange and complex ideas like relativity or in philosophy classes I learn about ideas like phenomenology which are communicated to me by means of the teachers who I hear and see. Can I really suggest that those ideas, which are communicated clearly and reasonably, are my own creations? That seems highly unlikely if not impossible. 

Unfortunately these arguments become far too involved and philosophical for the bounds of this essay. However, my argument is still strong enough to answer the essay's question fittingly. To phrase it explicitly, my answer to the question is that we can trust our senses to give us truth concerning the external world given that the sense data I experience fits coherently and logically into my immediate situation and is free of contradictions. As such I should be able to prevent myself from making false and untrue conclusions, concerning the external world, which are based upon my sensory experiences.

