Three Mistakes
About the Senses

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Declaration

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Abstract

Three widespread assumptions about the human senses are challenged. These are that we have five senses, that they function independently, and, for the purposes of theorising perception, that vision can serve as a typical sense. These assumptions underlie most philosophical treatments of the senses in epistemology and the philosophy of perception, but they are mistaken.

Contemporary attempts to count senses generally use some combination of four criteria based on sensations, organs, stimulus and behaviour. I examine these criteria and show them to be separately insufficient and jointly incoherent. In particular, the pluralism of physical theory and difficulties with dividing primary from secondary qualities complicate counting according to stimulus, while the other criteria advise large but indefinite counts.

I consider recent proposals defending the traditional count of five based on language use, proprioceptive awareness, and pragmatic utility, and reject them all. The traditional count is best explained on the basis of differences in sensory experience, coupled with easily identified organs, together with a mistaken tendency to separate the perceiver from the world.

Rather than attempting a more critically informed count, I argue that attempts to count the senses are currently based on false presuppositions regarding the individuation of the senses. I show that the traditional sense modalities are complex and do not function separately. This is achieved by considering the sense of balance, whereby the perceiver participates in dynamical relations. Balance is implicit in all perceiving.

Assumptions that cause difficulties in counting the senses are traced to a preoccupation with vision, which is usually treated as a single sense only instrumentally controlled by the perceiver. I point out that understanding seeing has historically been a misguided effort to explain what is seen on the basis of two-dimensional retinal images and a separation of perception from action.

By noting the dependence of seeing on looking, I argue that seeing has been misrepresented in philosophical accounts of perception. What follows is that some of the important problems of epistemology have arisen from attempts to base theories of perception on a false picture of seeing. The philosophical views of Thomas Reid are used throughout to evaluate the modern debates and place them in a wider historical context.
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During the final year I had the privilege to attend a conference celebrating 300 years since the birth of Thomas Reid. It is hard to overstate how important this was for an amateur in Reid studies, who nevertheless wanted to put Reid’s congenial views at the centre of the argument. I wish to thank the organisers and attendees, whose friendliness and helpful explanations of Reid’s ideas gave me a tremendous boost in confidence.

The early history of the psychology and philosophy of the ‘hidden’ senses is an endlessly fascinating topic and I am grateful to Nick Wade for sharing his detailed knowledge of its intricacies with me. I would also like to thank John Henry, for sparking an interest in Robert Boyle in me all those years ago. Many thanks to Fiona Macpherson for making pre-publication material from her valuable new book on the senses available, and for asking important questions. Thanks too to everyone who has made their reprints, preprints and unpublished work freely available and generously responded to my emailed inquiries.
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father.
And thus as we descend the scale of being,
Nature speaks to other senses—
to known, misunderstood, and unknown senses:
so speaks she with herself
and to us in a thousand modes.

— J. W. von Goethe
Farbenlehre
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