

90. Something we know not what

George Bishop stared intently at the bowl of oranges before him and then thought it into thin air.

He started by making an obvious distinction between the features of the oranges that are mere appearances and those properties that they really have. The colour, for example, is a mere appearance: we know that the colourblind, or animals with different physiologies, see something very different from the normal human experience of 'orange'. The tastes and smell are also mere appearances, as these too vary according to who or what is perceiving the fruit, while the fruit itself remains the same.

But as he started stripping away the 'mere appearances' from the fruits, he found himself left with vanishingly little. Could he even talk about the actual size and shape of the fruits, when these features seem to depend on how his senses of sight and touch perceive them? To truly imagine the fruit in itself, independent of the mere appearances of sense perception, he was left with the vague idea of something, he knew not what. So what is the real fruit: this gossamer 'something' or the collection of mere appearances after all?

Source: *The Principles of Human Knowledge* by George Berkeley (1710)



It doesn't take much reflection to open up the distinction between appearances and reality. As infants, we are 'naive realists', assuming the world is just as it appears. As we grow up we learn to distinguish between the way things appear to our senses and the way they really are. Some of these—such as the difference between things which are genuinely small and those which are merely far away—are so obvious that they are scarcely remarked upon. Others, such as the way in which the taste or colour of a thing varies according to the perceiver, we know, even though in everyday life we ignore or forget it.

As we develop a basic scientific understanding of the world, we probably come to see this difference in terms of the underlying atomic structure of objects and the way in which they appear to us. We may be dimly aware that this atomic structure itself is explained in terms of sub-atomic structure, but we need not bother ourselves with the details of our current best science. All we need to know is that the way things appear is a function of the interplay between our senses and the way they really are.

All this is little more than mature common sense, but it is a common sense that glosses over some important details. Reality has been distinguished from appearances, yet we don't have a clear idea what this reality is. No problem, you may think. The intellectual division of labour means that we leave this job to the scientists.

Is it not the case, though, that scientists are as much in the world of appearances as we are? They too study what is presented to our five senses. The fact that they have instruments that allow them to examine what is not visible to the naked eye is a red herring. When I look through a telescope or microscope I am as stuck in the world of appearances as I am when I see with

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unaided vision. Scientists are not looking beyond the world of appearances; they are merely looking at that world more closely than we ordinarily do.

2) This is a philosophical, not a scientific, problem. ^{why?} We seem to understand the difference between the world of appearances and the world as it is, but it seems impossible to get behind appearances and see this 'real' world. When we understand that the moon is far away, not tiny, or that the stick in water is not bent, we are not getting beyond appearances, we are merely learning how some appearances are more deceptive than others.

This leaves us with a dilemma. Do we remain committed to the idea of a world beyond appearances, and accept that we have no idea what this world is, and can't even imagine how we might come to know it? Or do we give up on the idea and accept that the only world we can live in and know is the world of appearances after all?

See also

- 28. The nightmare scenario
- 51. Living in a vat
- 81. Sense and sensibility
- 98. The experience machine