

The content of perception is metaphysically given. As such, perception is unjudgeable. Just as it makes no sense to evaluate a natural occurrence like rainfall, it makes no sense to evaluate the content of perception. Rainfall is neither “valid” nor “invalid” — it just *is*. In exactly the same way, *hearing* the rainfall is neither valid nor invalid — it just *is*.

Questions of validity or invalidity arise only where there is volitional control of the cognitive process, culminating in a conceptual judgment — as when you *think* to yourself: “the pitter-patter I’m now hearing is rain.” That thought may be true or false, valid or invalid, correct or mistaken. But none of these things applies to the *hearing*, as such. The hearing is the physically necessitated result of the action of sound waves on one’s ears and what one’s brain, as a physical organ, does with that input.

You control your thinking, your judgments, your reasoning, your interpretation of sensory experiences, but the experiences themselves are produced automatically, independent of your volition, which means that they are neither valid nor invalid, but “metaphysically given” facts.

Again quoting Rand: “[man’s] organs of perception are physical and have no volition, no power to invent or to distort . . . the evidence they give him is an absolute.” [AS, 1041]

There is indeed a polemical value to saying “Perception is valid,” and such a statement is unobjectionable, if one means “Perception is of reality.” But the deeper point is that perception is, if I may put it this way, beyond valid: as metaphysically given, perceptual data are the standard for judging what is valid or invalid.

The technical way of putting the conclusion is that perception is “inerrant.” The content of perception cannot be erroneous or mistaken. More simply, the point to be affirmed is: “I see things, I hear things. I touch things and feel them. I am aware, in various forms, of things.”

You cannot mis-see, mis-hear, mis-taste, etc. There is no such thing as “mis-perceiving.” The very term is a contradiction: to perceive something is to be aware of it. And there is no such thing as awareness of what doesn’t exist. We come back to perception as a corollary of the axiom of consciousness: perceivers perceive.

Perception vs. Conceptual Identification

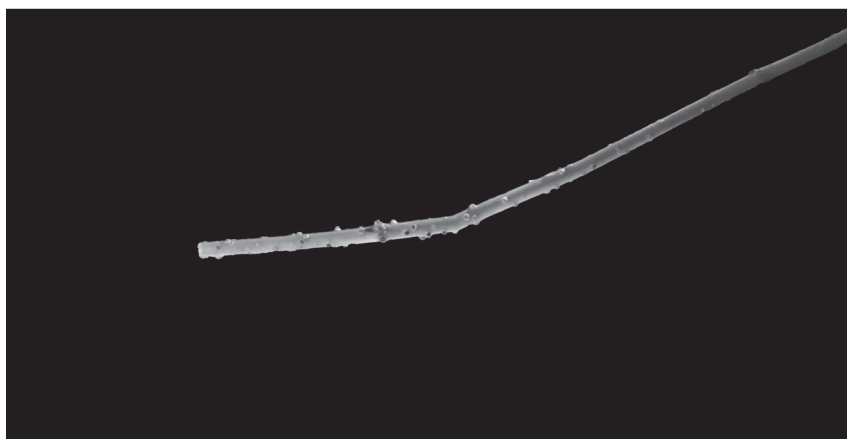
There is, however, a familiar objection to the idea that perception is inerrant: the Argument from Illusion. This argument claims that optical illusions, and illusions involving other senses, show that the senses can be in error.

The millennia-old example is that of the straight object that appears as if it were bent when semi-submerged in water:



The stick looks bent, but it is actually straight. Isn't this, then, a case of mistaken perception? No, for we must distinguish between the act of *seeing* and the use of *concepts* to describe what is seen. There is nothing erroneous about the stick's appearance; one's eyes and brain are functioning as their nature demands. The perceptual data are not wrong or mistaken — but they can be *misleading*: a naïve observer is likely to conclude: "This stick is bent." If he does, it is that *conceptual judgment*, not the seeing, that is mistaken.

The water's refraction of light makes the stick look bent (i.e., resemble actually bent sticks), and one expects it to still look that way out of water:



But seeing is seeing, not predicting. The sheer sight of the stick is not a prediction as to how it will look out of water, or in other conditions of perception; perception does not transcend time in that way, reaching into the future. (There are indeed perceptual-level associations and expectations about the immediate future formed pre-conceptually, as when a kitten learns to associate a match flame with a painful burn and subsequently to avoid it. This is perceptual association, not conceptual judgment.)

Expectations based on perceptual association sometimes fail to be fulfilled. For instance, a pet cat may associate hearing a certain sound in the kitchen with being fed but not be fed. Such frustrated expectations are not errors in cognition. Only states of awareness, not things like forming and using associations or expectations, count as acts of perception.³¹

In this so-called “illusion,” what we see is the way a straight stick looks when semi-submerged in water. The image on this page, after all, is a photograph — the camera did not “mis-photograph” and the eyes do not “mis-see.”

Vision gives us an awareness of things in a certain form — how things look. Hearing gives us how things sound. Touch gives us how things feel. There is not and could not be a perception of things the way they do *not* look, sound, feel, etc. Things look, sound, and feel the way they must, given the sensory inputs and the brain’s automatic processing of them. (Here, the water refracts the light waves, as it must.)

There are countless other illusions, involving shape, color, lightness and darkness, motion — you name it. But they all have the same form:

Our senses tell us so and so.
But so and so is not the case.

Our senses have erred.

The error is in the first premise. Our senses do not talk to us. The senses do not form propositions. They do not make judgments. Perception is only perception, not perception plus a proposition. Your sight of the stick does not even include the simple proposition: “That is a stick.”

It is crucial to be absolutely clear on what is perception and what is more advanced than perception.

31 Cf. Gregory Salmieri’s distinction between perception and “post-perceptual processing.”
[SALMIERI, 2006]