



Psychological Reality: Why We See the World the Way We Do

Video Transcript

Living with uncertainty

What does it mean to say that something is true? There are different ways to answer this apparently simple question.

Some perspectives emphasize the independence of the world from the observer. Others focus more on the structures through which experience is formed. In this course, we assume that the world exists independently of us. At the same time, we acknowledge that we never really encounter this world directly. In this way, we work within a critical realist perspective.

On the one hand, there is a subject-independent world, a reality to which any organism must adapt in order to survive. On the other hand, there is the phenomenal world of the organism: the world as it appears in experience. Truth, in this framework, is understood as the overlap between these two perspectives.

The central question is: Does what we experience match the world that exists independently of us?

In psychology, this overlap is often called veridicality. The term was introduced by Egon Brunswik. It refers to how accurately perception reflects the external world. Perception is thought to estimate the actual properties of the physical environment. Over time, evolution has shaped these estimates to be reliable, because organisms that perceived the world more accurately were more likely to survive. This is, at the core, an evolutionary argument for the veridicality of perception. The way we experience the world must be sufficiently veridical. That is, accurate enough to guide behaviors that support survival.

Some scientists challenge this view. They argue that evolution does not have to shape perception to match objective reality. In their view, survival does not depend on representing the world as it really is. It rather depends on understanding it in a way that results in behavior that increases fitness. Perception in this perspective is tuned to usefulness rather than to correspondence. It does not need to mirror reality. It only needs to promote adaptive behaviors.

This position is put forward in approaches such as the Interface Theory of Perception. It also informs Error Management Theory. This theory examines how organisms make decisions under uncertainty. It asks why some types of errors are more costly than others.



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of Basel**

To examine this tension more closely, we will later turn to a thought experiment. It asks under what conditions evolution would favor greater precision in perception — and when it would not.

These questions bring us back to our central concern. If evolution shapes how we experience the world, what does that imply for truth? Is the way we perceive the world veridical — or primarily adaptive? By the end of this chapter, we will be in a better position to answer these questions. Let us begin.