

## **How Similarity Unveils the World**

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Roughly speaking, theory-ladenness is the idea that our physiological constitution, language, prior knowledge, theoretical prejudices and expectations affect and potentially distort what we perceive, how we perceive it, how we report those perceptions and how we utilise the reports to assess our beliefs and theories. Obviously, there is great variation in the potential sources of distortion, what they are meant to distort and how they are meant to distort it. The term 'theory' is thus here construed broadly to include all these sources. In this talk I consider the specific problems that arise from a special case of the theory-ladenness of perception. I argue that human perception is typically sufficiently undistorted to help produce beliefs that correctly or nearly correctly describe features of the world.

The special case of theory-ladenness I am concerned with is the following. Suppose that perception is affected in such a way that it is very unlikely for two individuals (perhaps due to subtle differences in their neuroanatomy) to have similar perceptions of a given object, even if the conditions under which they perceive the object are identical or at least near identical. Can we still make sense of the claims: (i) that different individuals can independently come to believe some of the same things about objects in the world on the basis of perceptual judgments and (ii) that these beliefs correctly or nearly correctly describe features of the world. I answer both questions in the affirmative with the help of two principles that have been independently endorsed (in one form or another) by a number of notable figures in the history of thought, including Descartes, Locke, Hume, Mill, Helmholtz, Weyl, Russell, Quine and Fodor. In their naïve formulations, the principles hold that (i) different perceptions imply different stimuli and (ii) different stimuli imply different perceptions. I offer a reformulation of these principles that addresses a number of problems. Moreover, I argue that we can establish analogous principles that codify relations of similarity that hold between objects in the world itself. The upshot of all these principles is that they allow us to adequately explain how it is that we can come to learn and successfully interact with our environment.