**Big Question 1 - Can we trust our immediate knowledge about the world?**

*(Source: Adapted from Theoryofknowledge.net)*

**Overview / Initial Thoughts**

Our most immediate way of knowing about the world is sense perception. Before we have learned how to talk or reason or make sense of our emotions, we interact with the world via our many senses. We take it for granted that seeing is believing, and many aspects of life - such as the law, social interaction, and even scientific understanding - are based on this. But is this a valid assumption? Can we be led astray by our senses?

As we will see, we can only make sense of knowledge provided by the senses by putting it into the context of previous experiences - our memories. We generally conceive of memory as a storage mechanism similar to a hard drive, and we trust what we retrieve from it. This, too, forms the basis of the law, with eyewitness testimony representing the gold standard of evidence in a criminal trial. But again, are there problems with this approach? Is our faith in what we remember well-placed?

**Ways of Knowing Areas of Knowledge**

Sense Perception The Natural Sciences

Memory

**Key Concepts and Questions**

***Sense Perception***

* Explain how perception is a combination of sensation and interpretation.
* Explain Beau Lotto’s assertion that “context is everything”.
* How does a person’s mental map affect perception?
* Outline the reasons that we should be cautious about relying on perception as a source of knowledge. (See pg. 130 of the text.)
* Suggest ways that we can confirm that sense perceptions are accurate. (See pgs 131-132 of the text.)

***Memory***

* What are the three types of memory? (See pgs. 252-253 of the text.)
* Outline the mechanisms of memory acquisition, retention and retrieval, including the difference between long- and short-term memory. (See pgs. 254-255)
* What is the influence of long-term memory on judgment?
* Outline the biases that may limit the accuracy of memories.
* Outline the sources of inaccuracy in eye-witness testimony.

***Other***

* Compare and contrast the empiricist and rationalist approaches to knowledge.
* Is the world we see the real world?
* Can virtual reality help us understand reality?

**Key Terms**

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| --- | --- |
| ***Sense perception*** | ***Memory*** |
| Change blindness  Empiricism  Gestalt psychology  Illusions  Common sense (or Naïve) realism  Scientific realism  Perceptual learning  Phenomenalism  Rationalism  Synesthesia  Visual thinking | Amnesia  Collective memory  Eyewitness testimony  False memory syndrome  Visualization |

***Key Thinkers***

Charles Darwin

Rene Descartes

Donald Hoffman

Elizabeth Loftus

John Locke

Beau Lotto

Elon Musk

Hilary Puttnam

**Previous/Potential Essay Questions**

### "Error is as valuable as accuracy in the production of knowledge." To what extent is this the case in two areas of knowledge? (May 2016)

### “Humans are pattern-seeking animals and we are adept at finding patterns whether they exist or not” (adapted from Michael Shermer). Discuss knowledge questions raised by this idea in two areas of knowledge (May 2017)

### “When should we trust our senses to give us truth?” (May 2005 / Nov. 2008)

### “To what extent may the subjective nature of perception be regarded as an advantage for artists but an obstacle to be overcome for scientists? (Nov. 2004 / May 2005)

### “Explore the knowledge issues raised by the fallibility of memory in two areas of knowledge”.

### “’All knowledge ultimately depends on memory.” Assess this claim. Does it follow that memory is the most important way of knowing?”