



A useful world

Description

It matters little for the survival of an organism (plant, animal, human) whether we have an accurate or a true understanding of the world around. It's more important that our understanding is useful to us. That's according to neuroscientist Anil Seth in *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*.

We don't perceive the world as it is, we perceive it as it is useful for us to do so (Kindle loc 1,862).

This is a pragmatic position that puts the spotlight on practicalities, the usefulness of certain actions, and perception as an active and consequential process driven by survival-oriented life-affirming actions.

Action is inseparable from perception. Perception and action are so tightly coupled that they determine and define each other. Every action alters perception by changing the incoming sensory data, and every perception is the way it is in order to help guide action (loc.1,859)

This is a stance adopted from biology. It argues from neuroscience and biological evolution and pertains to what we normally regard as raw sense experience: what we see with our eyes, hear, touch, etc, albeit as a shared process.

when we agree about our hallucinations, that's what we call reality (loc.1,480)

Cultural perceptions

The book doesn't go into this, but the theory becomes more complicated when we think of belief systems and expectations tempered by layers of social and cultural conditioning, not to mention critical reflection, negotiation and recorded accounts of theories and experiences developed by communities of perceptual interpreters: scientific data, arguments, literature, performances, instruments, artefacts.

Various philosophical safeguards against relativism by Pragmatists such as [William James](#) (who Seth references) and [C.S. Peirce](#) (absent from the book's bibliography) provide arguments that deal with the problem of relativism.

It's not in the book, but Seth's *action-based perception theory* does not mean that any perception, delusion, hallucination, preference is acceptable as long as it enables the human exercising that perception to survive and flourish. Were that the case then there would be no argument in favour of certain truth claims (other than it suits me to believe this), or against conspiracy theories and other denials of what is *really* the case.

See posts: [Rogue fan fiction: the peculiar case of QAnon](#) and [Speak truth to power](#).

Bibliography

- Coyne, Richard. *Peirce for Architects*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Seth, Anil. *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*. London: Faber, 2021.

Note

- Featured image is of flamingos at Ras Al Khor Flamingo Hide Viewing Area, Dubai, UAE. In their world view the birds were oblivious to the wooden hide construction, the birdwatchers, and the nearby sacks of dried shrimp, but their perception of the game warden who distributed the contents were palpable to them, along with other myriad perceptual objects invisible to us humans.

Category

1. Body

Tags

1. Peirce
2. pragmatism

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