

“You Perceive with Your Mind”: Knowledge and Perception

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A major theme in rap lyrics is that the only way to survive is to use your head, be aware, know what’s going on around you. That simple idea packs a lot of background. The most obvious ideas about knowledge turn out if you look at them close up to be pretty questionable. For example: How do we get knowledge about the world? A natural and ancient answer to this question is that much if not all of our knowledge comes from our senses. So for example the nose gives us knowledge of what things smell like, and if all goes well, also indicates whether the thing we’re smelling is healthy, tasty, or noxious. Likewise, the eyes tell us the color and shape of things, and thereby give us information about whether those things are useful, dangerous, and so on. Like everybody else, rappers know all this. Or do they? Maybe some rappers know that this isn’t really so.

I’m not talking about Extra-Sensory Perception, channeling, auras, or about what Common calls ‘The 6th Sense’. I’m talking about the way that philosophers like to question the most mundane ideas to see if they contain something inside in need of, well, liberation. We’re going to discover that philosophers and rappers can find a common cause.

This idea we mentioned just a moment ago about what the senses convey is so natural, pervasive and ancient that it’s part of common sense. According to this idea, what the senses

¹ From D. Darby and T. Shelby (eds.) *Hip Hop and Philosophy*, with a preface by Cornel West (Open Court, 2005)

give us is something like what you see on the plasma screen in the pimped out stretch Hummer®, or hear on a newly minted Funkmaster Flex track, or smell when having one of OutKast's gasoline dreams. It's what some philosophers who've considered how perception works call *sense data*. The idea is that the senses give your mind a picture, either a visual picture, an auditory picture, or one made up of information from other senses, like olfactory, taste, or tactile. What happens then, according to this sense data idea, is that your mind pays attention to this picture, and then gets from it information about how the world is. Then, on the basis of that information you go on to do stuff, like grab the keys to the whip, flip on the beats, pump up the volume, and roll through the hood on the dubs. Like I said, everyone knows this. And like I said, some rappers might know it isn't really true.

Well, isn't that how perception works? Let's keep in mind that just because some idea is part of common sense, that doesn't mean it's true. After all, it was once common sense that the Earth stands still while the Sun and stars revolve around it. And it was once common sense that when someone acts like a freak they're possessed by a devil, spirit, or something of the kind. But now we know that neither of these bits of common sense is true. The Earth doesn't stand still, and people's weird behavior is often the result of mental disease like psychosis, dementia, and so forth. What was common sense to one era often turns out to be a bogus piece of mythology to another. I'm sure that a lot of what we now take for granted as common sense will be scoffed at by some future generation as bogus mythology as well. Might the sense-data idea of perception be one of these?

Descartes and the Gorillaz

The Gorillaz think so. Peep the knowledge they drop on their cut, “Clint Eastwood”:

I'm in them
 Every sprouting tree
 Every child apiece
 Every cloud you see
 You don't see with your eyes
 You perceive with you mind
 I see destruction and demise
 Corruption in disguise²

What could Del the Funky Homosapien mean in saying that you don't see with your eyes? After all, what else would you perceive with? Del probably wouldn't be too happy with the suggestion that instead you perceive trees or clouds with your ears, or nose, or tongue. So what could he be trying to say?

Before trying to figure that out we should pause to notice that the philosopher René Descartes said something amazingly like this about four centuries ago. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*³ he considers the idea that when he looks out the window he sees people. That seems perfectly obvious, but then Descartes points out that one should never be misled by ordinary ways of talking. Sometimes such ways of talking are confused or misleading, or, as Jay-Z would say, they leave room for “Reasonable Doubt.” Descartes also points out that what his eyes really see are Kangols, Rocawear®, and Jordans. The conclusion that he sees people outside his window must be something that his mind adds to the sensory information, not

²Gorillaz featuring Del the Funky Homosapien, “Clint Eastwood,” *Gorillaz* (Virgin, 2001).

³Published in 1641, translated into English by D. Cress and published by Hackett (1993).

something that his eyes give him directly. That's awfully close to saying that one perceives with one's mind, not one's eyes:

...were I perchance to look out my window and observe men crossing the square, I would ordinarily say I see the men themselves just as I say I see the wax. But what do I see aside from hats and clothes, which could conceal automata? Yet I judge them to be men. Thus what I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is my mind.⁴

After denying that we perceive with our eyes (or, apparently, any other senses), the Gorillaz propose instead that we perceive with our minds. Similarly, on *Like Water for Chocolate* (MCA Records, 2000), Common tells us that he has seen street dreams deferred, and he has dark spots in his mind where the scene occurred. This also suggests that our minds perceive. On the face of it, that sounds a little crazy. Minds are where we think, reason, and make decisions. But your mind doesn't have eyes, ears, a nose or a tongue. So what might it mean to say that you perceive with your mind?

I think that these rappers might have something interesting to say here as a challenge to the sense-data theory of perception. But it's gonna take a minute to lay it out. First of all, let's go back to the sense-data theory of perception and contemplate it more carefully. For one, think

³Ibid. *Meditations* II.

again about that picture of the mind as paying attention to the information that the senses fetch up. How does it know about that information? Does it look? Well, to do that, it would have to use some eyes. But you only have two pairs of eyes, not four. Your mind doesn't have its own private pair. So the mind can't be looking at the picture that the senses give. Does the mind smell? Like with the case of eyes, the mind doesn't have its own nose, separate from the one on your face. You can see the same point goes for all your other senses. So how does the mind get information from what the senses send its way?

Remember that the sense-data idea told us that we learn about the world by having the senses provide information to the mind. The mind then gathers that information, and uses it to deal with the world. But we got all mixed up over the question how the mind really gathers that information. Either it perceives that information, or it gets it in some other way. It definitely doesn't perceive it. After all, the mind doesn't have its own set of senses over and above your one pair of eyes, nose, and so on. So the mind gets that information in some other way. What might that other way be?

Sometimes when an MC has an insight it's a powerful one but might contain more than one idea. That's what's going on here, in the idea that you perceive with your mind. I'm suggesting that there are two ideas here, not one. The first idea is the simpler. It's that "the mind" isn't some special and mysterious place separate from your senses. No, "the mind" is a complex thing that contains senses as its parts. It's also got memory, judgment, intentions, and not everything in it has got to be conscious. (Back to this last part in a moment.) But part of what's going on in the idea that you perceive with your mind is that the senses are part of your

mind, not external to it. If you think otherwise it'll be a mystery how the mind ever learns anything about the world.

What's the second idea? It's that the eye always comes ancient to its image.⁵ Meaning? Meaning that whenever we perceive anything at all we always have a huge set of background assumptions about what to look for, what is important, and what is most relevant to our survival. Here's an example known as the Cocktail Party Effect. I'm sure you've been at a large set chillin' when your ears prick up, and you strain all your effort on a conversation two headz away because you're *certain* you just heard your name dropped. Of all the things in the "blooming, buzzing, confusion" of experience, you home in on that one, and of course the reason why is that it probably concerns you. You very much want to know what they're saying about you. The Cocktail Party Effect shows that you can pick out a needle in a haystack of experience. That's because the mind isn't like a piece of wax, which sits passively while the world makes an imprint. Actually the mind is more like a heat-seeking missile. It homes in on the things that matter, whizzing right by all the rest.

So the idea that you perceive with your mind actually contains two ideas inside it. First it's that the senses are really part of the mind, not external to it. Second, it's that all of our perception is driven, colored, and guided by our interests, needs, aims, and sometimes even biases. For better or worse, your mind is there at work all the time when you perceive, not in the backseat receiving information, but guiding, interpreting, coloring and casing your world.

⁵ Ernest Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (London, 1963).

The New Unconscious

For better or worse, as a species we wouldn't have had a prayer of surviving if we hadn't been able to detect quickly and accurately things around us that are dangerous, noxious, potentially useful, edible, or sexually attractive. But in some ways these skillz can also be a pitfall because they can create bias. Here are some ways they might do that. First of all, there's a vast ocean of things that your mind does that you might not be aware of. According to a recent convergence of research in experimental psychology, our minds have an enormous unconscious component even though that component doesn't much resemble the one that Sigmund Freud talked about. Maybe there's an ego, an id, and a superego that are forever struggling for control over your actions. Maybe not. In recent years we've started to ask whether there's really evidence for this theory of the mind, and it turns out that such evidence is very hard to find. Maybe Freud was right. No one is saying for sure that he was wrong. But at this point the jury is still out over the question whether he was right, and I won't assume in what follows that he was.

Recent work in psychology gives evidence of a different kind of unconscious. It's the kind that guides us through our everyday dealings with the world. When you look at something you usually figure out in a split second how far away it is, and that judgment is one that you don't make consciously. So you must be making it unconsciously. Again, imagine I tell you that your friend fat Joe has been seeing someone new. You will immediately figure that this is a romantic thing with fat Joe, rather than assume that he's been paying visits to a newborn baby. But this other reading is possible; I didn't *say* that fat Joe has a new flame, and a newborn baby is, after all, a new person. You got my drift, but most likely got it through an unconscious

process instead of a conscious one.

The overall picture that emerges of the conscious mind and its relation to the unconscious mind is that of a pilot of a 747 jet to the automatic controls of that jet. Generally, the pilot can fly using only the automatic controls and just needs to make sure that no unusual situations are arising such as turbulence or other weather conditions. Similarly, a huge amount of what enables you to get around in your environment, according to this new theory of the *adaptive unconscious*, is “auto-pilot.” You could pay conscious attention to it if you had to, but unless there’s some human or environmental turbulence there’s generally no need to do that.

But this automatic part of your self, this adaptive unconscious, is not perfect. Sometimes it makes judgments that are shortsighted or ill-advised or impulsive. Public Enemy writes this in “He Got Game:”

Folks don't even own themselves
 Payin mental rent
 To corporate presidents⁶

You can’t own yourself if you don’t know yourself. Here are some ways in which we are strangers to ourselves:

1. Many of us confidently feel that we never forget a face. But we can easily be tricked into thinking that a face we are looking at is a familiar one. Psychologists Heather Kleider and Stephen Goldinger have conducted experiments showing that if you present someone with a

⁶ “He Got Game,” *He Got Game* (Def Jam, 1998).

photo of a person, she'll be a lot more likely to say that it's someone she's seen before if that photo is clear rather than distorted.⁷ But if you think about it, just being clear is no reason to think the photograph is of someone you've seen before. Apparently the clarity of a photo gives us that feeling of familiarity that we mistake for having seen the face before.

2. It's very common to get aroused and then be mistaken about the cause of that arousal. This is shown dramatically in the so-called Love on the Bridge experiment (not the Queensbridge, though it could have taken place there as well). A female experimenter placed herself at the end of a long and treacherous bridge in a state park, and watched for men as they came across. She then interviewed men as they came across the bridge, and at the end of the interview she tore off a piece of paper, wrote down her digits, and told the interviewee that she would be happy to discuss the experiment further if they wanted to holla back at her. The experimenter then did the same thing with men she found relaxing on a park bench. The question: How likely were men from each group to call her later to ask her on a date? It turns out that 65% of the men on the bridge called and asked her on a date, while only 30% of men she found sitting on a park bench called her for a date. The evidence suggests that those men she interviewed at the end of the bridge attributed their arousal to an attraction to her rather than to the fact that they had just completed a physically challenging activity. In most cases, of course, they were probably

⁶ H. Kleider and S. Goldinger, 'Illusions of face memory: Clarity breeds familiarity,' *Journal of Memory and Language* **50** (2004): 196-211.

mistaken about the true source of their arousal.⁸

3. Can you tell whether someone is faking an emotion in his or her facial expression? Most of us feel sure that we can tell whether, for instance, someone is forcing a smile or making a genuine one. It turns out, though, that the visual difference between a forced and a spontaneous smile is just that the face is slightly symmetrical in the former case but asymmetrical in the latter case. Further, those differences are not readily detectable to most people. There are also auditory differences in their voices, but they too are not readily detectable. Judges, police, and many others whose work depends on telling the difference between liars and others don't actually do better than if they were just guessing.⁹ You probably don't either; yet you make a lot of important choices based on whether you think someone is showing their true feelings. 50 Cent says this in "21 Questions:"

If I fell off tomorrow would you still love me?

If I didn't smell so good would you still hug me?

If I got locked up and sentenced to a quarter century,

Could I count on you to be there to support me mentally?¹⁰

⁷ See Zillman (1978) 'Attribution and misattribution of excitatory reaction,' in Harvey, *et al*, eds. *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vol. II (Erlbaum): 335-68.

⁸ The fun and informative documentary, *The Face: Mask or Mirror?* narrated by John Cleese discusses some of these experimental findings.

¹⁰ "21 Questions," *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Interscope Records, 2003).

I sure hope he's got a way of knowing whether his girlfriend is sincere other than by looking at her face when she answers.

4. There are still a lot of racist people around, though maybe fewer than in the days of Jim Crow. While some racists are consciously so, either due to upbringing or to fear, as Boogie Down Productions edutains us on their cut, "The Racist," (*Edutainment*, Jive Records, 1990) there are also unconscious racists, not knowin' that they're racist, even denying their racism, but invading spaces and allowing racism to live on. For example, not long ago some experimenters posed as regular folks looking to rent or purchase a home. They met with real estate agents. Some of these experimenters were black, some white, some Hispanic, but they all just acted like normal folks in the market for a place to live. It was found that the real estate agents on average offered fewer housing options to the black and Hispanic experimenters, and were less likely to follow up their meetings with phone calls if the "clients" were black or Hispanic than if they were white.¹¹ The Black-Eyed Peas rap,

What's wrong with the world, mama
 People livin' like they ain't got no mamas
 I think the whole world addicted to the drama
 Only attracted to things that'll bring you trauma
 Overseas, yeah, we try to stop terrorism
 But we still got terrorists here livin'
 In the USA, the big CIA
 The Bloods and The Crips and the KKK

¹⁰ Yinger, J. 1995: *Closed Doors, Opportunities Lost: The Continuing Costs of Housing Discrimination* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation).

But if you only have love for your own race
 Then you only leave space to discriminate
 And to discriminate only generates hate¹²

This hate is especially hard to eradicate if it's not even conscious.

5. Finally, I'll bet you think that you'd become an incredibly happy person if you won the lottery. After all, that would enable you to pay all your bills, quit your gig, travel, get nice gear, a pimped out ride, and a house that could be featured on "Yo MTV Cribs." Plus you'd still have dough left over for the future. As a matter of fact, though, most of the time lottery winners end up being euphoric for a little while, and then after the thrill wears off, no happier than before. Besides, many lottery winners report being harassed by friends, relatives, and even strangers for money, and some have had to move to new neighborhoods where they can be anonymous so that people will leave them alone. As Biggie says, "no money, no problems." Psychologists who've studied lottery winners find that for the most part they've solved their financial problems but are no happier, and often less happy, than before.¹³ On that same track just mentioned, the Black-Eyed Peas predict as much:

Most of us only care about money makin'
 Selfishness got us followin' in the wrong direction
 Wrong information always shown by the media

¹² Black-Eyed Peas, "Where is the Love?" *Elephunk* (A&M Records, 2003).

¹³ See H.R. Kaplan (1978) *Lottery Winners: How They Won and How Winning Changed Their Lives* (Harper and Row).

Negative images is the main criteria

Infecting the young minds faster than bacteria

Kids wanna act like what they see in the cinema

Yo', whatever happened to the values of humanity

We're more sure than we deserve to be that we can identify a familiar face, we often mistake the source of our excitement or arousal, we're not very good at telling whether someone is faking an emotional face, many people are unconsciously racist while not being racist on the conscious level at all, and most of us are wrong to think that great wealth would make us happy. What should we make of all these details about how we are less aware of our true feelings than we might have thought? From these examples, and there are plenty more¹⁴, you can see that while the adaptive unconscious helps us get around in the world efficiently, it's also fallible. Part of knowing your own mind is a matter of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your unconscious self. That way you might understand the weaknesses well enough so they don't bog you down.

¹³ Wilson, T. (2003) *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Harvard).

Proper Use of the Mind

At this point you might be thinking, “Okay, so maybe a lot of people, me included don’t know themselves as well as they think they do. Does this mean I have to go sit for years on a shrink’s couch to find out what’s in my head?” Not necessarily. Talk therapy has its uses, but psychoanalysis (and other forms of talk therapy) and the experimental study of the unconscious are quite different things. Discussing feelings can help one cope with them better in some cases, but it’s doubtful that it’s going to help with, for example, the feeling that if only you won the lottery you’d be happy. If you agree that this feeling is not necessarily valid, that maybe you’re overrating the ability of great wealth to give you happiness, how can you overcome it other than by talk therapy?

One approach to this problem is to become clearer about what your real values are. Suppose you find enormous satisfaction in writing rap lyrics. Having amazing wealth isn’t going to help you much with that. It won’t give you inspiration, or help you find an original theme, or enable you to see life in the skewed way that good rap offers us. Sure, if you had a lot of dough your life would be more convenient and you might need to spend less time on mundane pursuits like feeding yourself so that you can spend more time on the verses. But you still won’t be happy until you’re creating funky lyrics. The same goes for love and friendship: Though it can buy plenty of substitutes, money can’t buy either of these things. Reflect for a moment on the things that you value, that give your life worth. These are the things that make happiness; bling is at best decoration on top of that.

I’m suggesting that knowing your own mind sometimes is just a matter of standing back

from your own life and coming to appreciate patterns that you might not notice from close up. Do people whose faces seem sincere often trick you? Do you sometimes look back to find that what you thought was love was actually lust, or some other kind of arousal? Do you consistently stay away from socializing with people from other races? These are behavior patterns that can show unconscious inclinations, tendencies, and habits that are not entirely productive. After becoming aware of them, one way to start to modify them is by behaving differently. Make an effort to pursue a friendship with someone from another race, try acting on your feelings for other people without getting carried away into thinking that those feelings must be love. And, in addition to watching people's faces when they talk, think about *why* they might be saying what they are.

My theme has been that your mind is bigger, more complex, and less open to your conscious awareness than you probably realize. In some ways this is a good thing; without our mind's being for the most part on "auto-pilot" we would spend most of each day just getting dressed. But making the most of one's life can depend on understanding how one's unconscious, this adaptive unconscious, can sometimes be shortsighted, impulsive, prejudiced, or overly confident. Maybe that's part of what Tupac was getting at in this last verse of his 'Letter To An Unborn Child':

Ha, Take care, Run wild, Be Smart
Follow the rules of the game
Maybe sometimes it's confusin
But the rules of the game is gonna get you through it
All day, everyday
Watch out for these saints and fakes
First comin down to death

Be an individual, Work hard, study
Get your mind straight, trust nobody¹⁵

So too, if Common is right on “The 6th Sense,” then real hip hop music, music from the soul, can help us see the relationship between knowledge and perception clearly. But to do this we must heed KRS-One’s sage advice on his track, “The Mind.” We must make up our–mind; we must clear our–mind; we must erase doubt and fear from our–mind; and then we can appreciate the way in which we perceive with our–mind.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Letter 2 My Unborn,” *Until the End of Time* (Interscope Records, 2001).

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