What is Perception?

stuff in the world
What is Perception?

- extracting information via the senses
- forming *internal representations* of the world

stuff in the world

percepts

process for:
Outline:

1. Philosophy:
   • What philosophical perspectives inform our understanding and study of perception?

2. General Examples
   • why is naive realism wrong?
   • what makes perception worth studying?

3. Principles & Approaches
   • modern tools for studying perception
Epistemology = theory of knowledge

• Q: where does knowledge come from?

Answer #1: Psychological Nativism

• the mind produces ideas that are not derived from external sources
Epistemology = theory of knowledge

• Q: where does knowledge come from?

Answer #1: Psychological Nativism
• the mind produces ideas that are not derived from external sources

Answer #2: Empiricism
• All knowledge comes from the senses
  Proponents: Hobbes, Locke, Hume
• newborn is a “blank slate” (“tabula rasa”)
Epistemology = theory of knowledge

• Q: where does knowledge come from?

Answer #1: Psychological Nativism

vs.

Answer #2: Empiricism

• resembles “nature” vs. “nurture” debate
• extreme positions at both ends are a bit absurd

(See Steve Pinker’s “The Blank Slate” for a nice critique of the blank slate thesis)
Metaphysics
Metaphysics = theory of reality

• Q: what kind of stuff is there in the world?

Answer #1: **Dualism**
• there are two kinds of stuff
• usually: “mind” and “matter”

Answer #2: **Monism**
• there is only one kind of stuff

- “materialism” (physical stuff)
- “idealism” (mental stuff)
Q: what is the relationship between “things in the world” and “representations in our heads”?
1. Naive Realism (or “common sense realism”)

- We perceive the world “as it is”
- Our minds have direct access to reality
2. Idealism

- The only reality is that of mind / ideas
- There is no evidence for / reason to believe in an external world
René Descartes (1596–1650)

“Meditations On First Philosophy”, 1641

• undertook a program of “radical skepticism”: decided to discard any idea that can be doubted

• senses can be fooled
• all sense data could be caused by an “evil demon”
• concluded that the only thing he could be certain of was that he existed. (“cogito ergo sum” = “I think, therefore I am”)
René Descartes (1596–1650)

“Meditations On First Philosophy”, 1641

• undertook a program of “radical skepticism”: decided to discard any idea that can be doubted

• arrives at a “dualist” theory of reality: matter and mind are the two kinds of stuff that exist
2. Idealism

Descartes’ supposition:

evil
demon
2. Idealism

Bishop Berkeley (1685–1753)
- idealist, empiricist
Modern variants:

• Brain in a vat

I'm walking outside in the sun!!
“What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know.”

—Morpheus in *The Matrix*, 1999

(movie clip)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnEYHQ9dscY
3. Representative Realism

- We perceive the external world indirectly & imperfectly, via intermediary “sense data”