

Thinking Through the Senses

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The senses occupy a paradoxical place in the history of philosophy. They are our primary means of engaging with the world, yet they have frequently been treated as inferior to reason and regarded with suspicion as unreliable sources of knowledge. In this paper I trace the philosophical history of the senses from antiquity to the present, examining how different traditions have understood the relationship between sensation, cognition, and the body. I explore the enduring hierarchy that privileges vision and hearing as ‘cognitive’ or distal senses while relegating taste, smell, and touch to a lower, more bodily status. I also examine a number of historical debates over whether humans possess more than the traditional five senses, considering proposals ranging from speech and sexuality to proprioception, intuition, and extrasensory perception. By bringing together philosophical, historical, and anthropological perspectives, I argue that the number and status of the senses are not fixed biological facts but reflect broader assumptions about reason, embodiment, knowledge, and cultural values. Rather than treating the senses as passive channels through which information reaches the mind, the chapter invites readers to reconsider them as active participants in human understanding and to question the philosophical commitments that have shaped sensory hierarchies for more than two millennia. | *Keywords: Philosophy of Perception, Hierarchy of the Senses, Embodiment, Epistemology, Sixth Sense*

1. Introduction

Philosophy has a split personality. This could be true in several ways, but the one I want to talk about here is the deep divide between body and mind. Ever since our earliest ancient philosophical roots, philosophers have talked about the body and mind as if they are distinct, separate, and sometimes even mutually exclusive. And the more we *talk*, the more we end up *thinking* of ourselves as distinct entities. The mind (or soul, *psyche* in Greek) is ephemeral and immaterial, but rational, and according to some, immortal. The body is physical, sensual, untrustworthy, and sometimes even construed as a burden to the mind. The mind thinks, and is capable of moral reasoning, and restraint, but the body is passive and its needs and desires can distract us from good thinking. For philosophers, there is no question that the mind is superior. But the history of the senses is not merely a history of perception. It is a history of what philosophers have valued. The senses that count as ‘higher’ or even

as genuine senses reveal deeper assumptions about reason, embodiment, morality, and what kinds of knowledge deserve philosophical attention. Here, I will talk about some of the important historical constructions of the role that the senses have played in the division, and connection, between the mind and the body. Interestingly, the senses play a key role in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. What I want to argue is that the classification and ranking of the senses reveal a culture's philosophical assumptions about the relationship between body, mind, and knowledge. The history of the senses is really the history of philosophy's changing ideas about what counts as knowledge. Sensory hierarchies are never merely about perception – they are expressions of deeper commitments about reason, embodiment, morality, and human nature.

2. A Hierarchy of Senses

Whether or not we admit it, philosophers have struggled with the senses for a long time – almost from the very beginning of philosophy. Our five senses (or maybe more, sometimes less) are the primary way in which we interface with the world around us. Our senses are all dependent upon healthy bodily functioning since a damaged physical body (eyes, ears, tongue, skin, or nose) can lead to compromised sensory experience. But beyond just the damaged senses, we often experience the world in different ways even when all of our senses are working just fine. We see different colours depending on other colours in proximity, and sometimes we have drastically different food preferences which influence our assessments of how good something is. Trained experts can hear or see or smell details that the untrained cannot, even though the sensory cues are exactly the same. Our sense experience is not always reliable, or objective, in the ways we wish it was, so that we could always know for sure that the way we experience the world is exactly the way the world is. The locus of concern about the senses for many philosophers is about how reliably we can know the world around us and the ways in which our mind interprets sensory data. Rationalists, like Plato and Descartes, thought that we could *only* trust the truths that the mind comes to on its own. They thought that our senses impose an unreliable divide between our minds and the physical world we live in. The empiricists, on the other hand, like Aristotle, George Berkeley, and David Hume, thought that we could get reliable knowledge from our perceptions of the physical world, through our senses. This debate between rationalism and empiricism has persisted throughout the history of philosophy. Each age brings its own arguments, and of course the reigning science and religion of each era changes many of our fundamental beliefs about human experience. But much of the history of philosophy is dedicated to this fundamental question of how the senses work, and how they can provide knowledge, even if the senses themselves are secondary to particular kinds of knowledge that we like to talk about. Some philosophers do not even discuss the senses when they talk about perception and *only* refer to the external world and the mind, bypassing the reality of the senses all together. We tend to think that knowledge only happens in the mind, but the senses are the required negotiator between the mind and the world. Without sensory input the mind has nothing to contemplate.

Most of what we know about the senses falls under the category of what is called philosophy of perception, or the *problem of perception*. Vision is so ubiquitous in the study of perception that when philosophers say perception they are almost always talking about vision, but all of our senses provide information on an unending basis and the inputs we get from them makes our ability to function possible at all. Our senses are ranked in order of importance, depending on how well they reliably convey knowledge. Vision is typically the clear winner. Vision is so much the winner that the other senses are often referred to as the non-visual senses. For many, Plato and Aristotle to start, vision is used as a metaphor for understanding and intellect as it is at the front of our head, at the top of our head, and represents what is best about us as humans. Hearing comes in a distant second, and then after that, smell, and then taste and touch are tied for last. The order of the last three has everything to do with how closely they are associated with the body. Vision and hearing are known as the distal senses because the way they acquire information is not attached to the physical body at all. Vision and hearing are the principal ways in which we acquire objective, reliable knowledge. Thus when two people see an object, they should be able to come up with roughly the same description of the object whether it be about colour, length, or size. The same is roughly true for hearing. Two people who are in close proximity hear the same tones, words, and music. *Interpretations* of sights and sounds might vary, but the sensory experiences, or sense data, are undeniable. Vision and hearing are so important to gaining knowledge that they are often referred to as the cognitive senses, or the intellectual senses.

The so-called lower senses, taste, smell, and touch, are known as the proximal senses since they acquire information literally through the physical body. Vision requires light, sound requires the vibrations of air waves, but touch and taste both involve direct contact with the body in order for sensations to register, and smell usually requires relatively close proximity (although this is also contested as with the examples of skunks or paper mills). Since we cannot know for certain if two subjects experience the exact same sensations of touch and taste, they are less reliable in providing knowledge. Taste often comes in dead last in this hierarchy since not only is it tied to the body, but in the process of tasting, we also ingest, and so the object of inquiry is literally consumed by the taster. It is destroyed, but also becomes one with the taster.

The lower senses are also more closely associated with pleasure and pain, which are often seen as being completely embodied. Vision and hearing, being cognitive, generally do not produce pleasure in the same way the body does. If we look at art, or beautiful scenery, this is thought to inspire cognitive reflection, but not bodily pleasure. If we taste a favourite dish, it is the physical experience we enjoy. Vision and hearing, although they can both produce cognitive pleasure, do not produce the *kind* of pleasure that one might lose themselves in, or need to over-indulge in. One can be captivated, or interested, but it does not happen that when looking at a painting one *cannot turn away* like it could happen with a container of ice cream, or with sexual pleasure. Interestingly, taste, touch, and smell are not themselves the culprits of

gluttony, but it is the body more generally that seems incapable of independent moderation. The body *needs* – it needs sleep, sex, food and drink, and without a rational mind we seem incapable of any meaningful self-regulation. Given this ranking, visual and auditory works tend to be considered more important and have more cognitive value than works that engage the bodily senses.

This ranking also impacts the social values that are associated with each of the senses. Sight, being king of the senses, is linked with the most important faculty of reason. Vision is said to be the most objective of the senses, and several scholars throughout the ages said that vision is more important than hearing because one can see much further than one can hear. Hearing was particularly important in the Middle Ages because of the importance that was put on listening to the word of God. Robert Jütte explains that hearing well was a “guarantee of salvation and obedience to God’s commandments” (Jütte, 2005, p. 66). He notes that *Schma Israel* (listen, Israel) are the first words of the most important prayer in Judaism indicating that one must *listen* in order to understand. Touch is literally coupled with the body and thus regarded as mere physical sensation or *mindless* pleasure. One cannot *know* things through the body so any sort of experiences taste, touch, and smell provide tend to be considered less important. Parents teach their children visual symbols (like the alphabet and basic symbols) well before they focus attention (if they ever do) on detailed smell identification. But the ability to detect smell accurately can often help with safety in the case of poison or smoke, and before major progressions in medicine, many physicians would smell (and on occasion even taste) patients to be able to detect subtle odours that various diseases tended to produce.

The importance of smell has changed quite a bit over the centuries. Lower animals depend on smell much more than humans developmentally because they are lower to the ground and cannot see as far as upright humans. But we depend less on smell now than humans have in past ages since we have invented cleaning agents, enclosed septic systems, and considerably better hygiene expectations. Strong smells are often associated with either food waste or rotting garbage, or the good smells of cooking. The upper class is often associated with pleasant smells, perfumes, or they do not tend to smell at all, while the lower classes are associated with body odour, household stench, and trash. Whether or not these stereotypes are accurate is questionable, but the impressions are often imagined even if they are not real. The upper class tends to have access to more spacious houses, cleaning methods, and of course, perfumes. The lower classes are not innately more smelly, but do not have such easy access to large airy spaces or cleaning essentials for bodies and homes. Sociologists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggested that “vision is associated with the upper classes due to its inherent detachment, while the mingling nature of smell makes it a sign for the ‘promiscuous’ lower classes” (Classen, 2001). The lower classes are more tightly associated with physical labour, sexuality, and food production, or, in other words, things having to do with the body. All of these things involve

the lower senses of taste (production and consumption), touch (sexuality and work), and smell (both bodies and spaces). It does not seem strange then, that there has been such a strong emphasis for philosophers on vision, as it is the sense that distances us not only from the body, but the physical work, pleasure, and care that bodies need in order to be sustained. Once philosophers began asking *which* senses deserve epistemic authority, a second question naturally followed: How many senses are there? If the traditional hierarchy reflects philosophical priorities rather than biological necessity, then perhaps the canonical list of five is equally open to revision.

3. A Sixth Sense

There has been much discussion of how perception works, but there has also been much discussion of *how many* senses there are. Although five has been a steady number, what those five are has not been consistent throughout history. The typical range is between four and eight, and most who claim more than five include variations of touch like pressure, temperature, and heaviness. Plato, in some places, did not distinguish clearly between senses and feelings. In one enumeration of perceptions, he “begins with sight, hearing and smell, leaves out taste, instead of touch mentions hot and cold, and adds sensations of pleasure, discomfort, desire and fear” (Classen, 1993, p. 2). Aristotle, on the other hand wanted to put an end to the discussion of the number of senses and said that there was “an intrinsic relationship between the senses and the elements” (Classen, 1993, p. 2). Earth, air, fire, water, and aether (the idea of the upper atmosphere according to the Ancient Greeks that was also air breathed in by the gods) needed to be matched directly with sense perception. Philo of Alexandria, a first century Jewish scholar, argued that there were seven senses; the five traditional senses plus reproduction and speech. Seven was an important number for Philo since it had allegorical connections to Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, as well as the seven days of the week. Speech is another sense that has been touted several times throughout history, discussed as our capacity for language most recently (Noam Chomsky for example). In the Middle Ages, Catholic confession manuals made direct links from sins to senses and claimed that speech was an additional sense (Howes, 2009, p. 4). In the 14th century another *Book on the Sixth Sense* (*Liber sexti sensus*) was written by philosopher Raymond Lull advocating for the sixth sense of speech or voice (Howes, 2009, p. 4).

In the 18th century at least one philosopher, Johann Gottfried von Herder, suggested that there was a sense of *beauty* that had to do with the feelings that vary in response to aesthetic objects (Herder, 2002). He also thought that aesthetics were deeply historical conditions, and what was considered beautiful in one time and place varies from time to time and culture to culture. For Herder, language, expressive and metaphorical language in particular, lays the foundation for the formulation and communication of thought itself, and so perceiving beauty in itself is allowed by the fact that one can interpret his or her own culture and express it and appreciate it.

Immanuel Kant (Herder's teacher) suggested that there was a different sixth sense that was associated with sexuality. Anyone who knows anything about Kant will know that he did not look upon sex or sexuality favourably (or women for that matter), but in his *Lectures on Ethics* (1764) he says that the sexual impulse is an "inclination that may be called appetite, and is directed to enjoyment of the other" (Kant, 1997, p. 384). He says sexual desire is "more a matter of warlike vengeance than an inclination" (Kant, 1997, p. 384). For Kant, the sensory organs are oriented toward *specific* sensory objects, and for him, sexual desire is an obvious one. This sexual sense is also something we should be ashamed of according to Kant, something we should work to minimize and control, and something that in all cases debases men, in particular. Given that men cannot want women for their *humanity*, but *only* for their *sex*, Kant says that "the sexual impulse puts humanity in peril of being equated with animality" (Kant, 1997, p. 384) since the essence of humanity is reason, not the debasement of the body. Because of this he says that masturbation is worse than suicide (both are acts that work against one's rational nature), but sexual desire remains a sixth sense like the object directed others.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a Frenchman who wrote one of the original philosophical treatises on gastronomy, *The Physiology of Taste* (1848), also supported sexuality as one of our primary senses, and in fact, *the most important sense* (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, p. 37). He outlines six senses in the very first paragraph of his book, claiming that each sense has a particular organ that it is associated with. Physical desire, he says, "draws the two sexes together so that they may procreate" (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, p. 37). Just as other senses have their own organs, so obviously does sexual desire. He says that "if taste, whose purpose is to enable a man to exist, is indisputably one of his senses, then how much more reasonable it is to call a sense that part of him destined to make mankind itself survive" (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, pp. 37–38). Given the importance of reproduction, Brillat-Savarin figured that sexual organs and sexual desire made as much sense as any other to count as one of the six senses.

In the 19th century and early 20th century, the most common candidate for a sixth sense were psychic powers of one sort or another and not by philosophers but by anthropologists and 'new age' scientists. David Howes explains that psychic abilities include spirit mediumship as well as "transference or 'telepathy,' premonitions or 'precognition,' clairvoyance or 'remote-viewing,' and levitation or 'psychokinesis'" (Howes, 2009, p. 6). These mental abilities were attempts to make scientific sense of many occult powers now deemed to be mental and not just spiritual. This was typical of the period in the early 20th century as attempts to make all things subject to scientific explanation that could previously not be explained. In 1934 Joseph Rhine, known as the 'father of modern parapsychology' published the best-selling *Extra-Sensory Perception*, making scientific claims about paranormal sensory perception. Rhine conducted scientific experiments in laboratories showing the consistent nature of the ways in which some people were able to obtain reliable information not using the traditional five senses.

In the 20th century many of the suggestions for a sixth sense had to do with aspects of the mind that could not be accounted for physically, or with standard medical or scientific explanations. ESP, the paranormal, and clairvoyance have all been objects of study that have amazed and confounded people since they do not work within the bounds of standard sense perceptions. The paranormal is that which goes beyond the so-called normal foundations of the brain, given a purely materialist account of the mind (Howes, 2009, p. 8). Materialism contains the notion of mind only to mental states that are reasonably produced by typical brain activity. Rupert Sheldrake has done extended research on the *sense of being stared at*, telepathy, and precognition. All of these abilities are widely experienced and scientifically studied as well as they can be, but the subjects of these experiences are still doubted since they do not fall neatly into that which is directly, or traditionally, scientifically observed and measured. Thus, it is easy for people to dismiss these extra-sensory perceptions as merely imagined. Sheldrake says that these kinds of telepathy or premonitions “appear to happen but if all possible kinds of forces, fields and information-transfer are already known to science, then they ought not to exist” (Sheldrake, 2009, p. 247). This really forces us to question whether the science we have of fundamental principles is complete or not, and further it forces us to question whether there are legitimate kinds of experiences that we still just cannot account for scientifically.

One other area in which we could potentially have a sixth sense is below the skin. We have a multitude of molecular and biological experiences that happen inside of our bodies that we are hardly ever aware of but which regulate our internal states. Howard Hughes explains that

our senses of balance, of body motion, and of posture, depend on sensory organs in the inner ear, in our joints, and in muscles [...] these organs provide the brain with information essential to life, but they do not produce conscious sensory experiences (otherwise, people would be aware of the onset of hypertension, and it would less frequently go undetected). (Hughes, 2001, p. 5)

There are a multitude of these senses that seem to exist internally to the body, but that are neither mental states nor sensory information from the external world. They are internal bodily senses like kinesthesia, muscle memory, and balance. These may not be considered senses in their own right because they are not directed specifically at receiving impressions from the external world.

Anthropologists study the senses in multiple cultures and ages and a few of these anthropologists have come up with an ever-evolving list of all of the senses that different cultures have argued for. They call this list an *abcderium* as it uses the alphabet to generate different ways of thinking about things and then organizing them. The *abcderium* of Extra/Sensory Powers includes the following:

Animal Magnetism (Mesmer); Anomalous Cognition; Anpsi; Balance; Beauty; Being stared at (Sheldrake); Blink (Gladwell); Body (Cashinahua); Bones (Andean); Clairallience; Clairaudience; Clairgustance; Clairsentience; Clairvoyance; Coenesthesia; Common Sense (or *sensus communis*); Cosmic

Consciousness; Déjà vu; Direction; Dowsing; Dreaming; Echolocation; Electroreception; ESP; Film Sense (Eisenstein); Genital; Gut Feeling; Hallucinogens; Hearing; Heart; Honor; Humor; Imagination; Inner Senses (Medieval); Instinct; Internal Senses (Eighteenth Century); Interoceptive Senses (Nineteenth and Twentieth Century); Intuition; Jacobson's Organ; Kinaesthesia; Liver; Magnetic; Mass Media; Memory; Mimetic Faculty; Mind (Buddhism); Moral Sense; Navigation; Occult; Pain; Paroptic Vision; Pineal Gland; Plant Psi; Precognition; Premonition; Pressure; Proprioception; Psychokinesis; Psychometry; Public Sense; Quintessence; Remote-viewing; Second Brain (Gershon); Second Sight (Scottish); Sight; Smell; Speech; Spiritual Senses (Origen, Swedenborg); Synaesthesia; Taste; Telepathy; Temperature; Third Ear; Third Eye; Touch; Trance; Unconscious (Freud); Vibration; Visionary; Whiskers; Wind (Navajo); X-ray; Yogic; Zen Meditation. (Howes, 2009, p. 358)

4. Conclusion

As we can see from this, there are lots of different ways of thinking about *how we know*, that go well beyond just the traditional five senses. Philosophers now, I suspect, stick with the traditional five because of tradition, but also because they align neatly with the ways of knowing that are traditionally accepted and understood.

As one might *see* at this point, we can only decide which sensations should count as senses by deciding what the definition of a sense is. Of course this might be a perfect job for a philosopher. If we begin with the assumption that there is an internal, coherent mind and the senses are embodied so that they just feed the mind information, but function only as passive mediators for sensory data, then making sense of the senses is a very different matter than if the senses are doing some of the interpretation of their own. It also seems to make a big difference if we lump the senses together as the senses or if we really consider them as fundamentally different kinds of reception or perception. The history of the senses reminds us that perception has never been merely biological. What counts as a sense – and which senses matter most – has always reflected deeper philosophical commitments about knowledge, reason, and what it means to be human.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21792524