

# Ask Aristotle ... on Epistemology!

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*Q: "Dear Aristotle, After some research, I've found all the claims of Objectivist epistemology to be wholly undeniable and consistent, except for one. The one I cannot reconcile with myself is the validity of our sensory perceptions. To illustrate my dilemma let me use The Matrix the movie as an analogy. In the movie, humans are deceived into an alternate reality by having ALL their senses fooled by a computer, which, if you don't believe in souls, is theoretically possible. So, in keeping with the analogy, how can we be sure that ALL our senses are not being fooled and we are not in the matrix? If such were the case, any appeal to further sensory perception to check whether our senses were being fooled would fail. Thanks, Chris*

**A: Hello Neo...er, I mean Chris, Once again we are faced with the age-old argument of how do we trust our senses and know that we are not being fooled somehow. This argument has taken on many forms over the ages, from "how do we know we are not living in a dream" to "what if we are in a laboratory with electrodes stuck in our heads as the subject of a mad scientist."**

**I don't know what you mean by "after some research," because I don't know what such research would consist of if you have cast aside the validity of your senses. One bit of research you must have certainly overlooked is Leonard Peikoff's discussion of this subject in his book, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. He explains that if we could not tell the difference between a dream and reality, then the concept of dream would have no meaning and the word would not exist in our vocabulary. He also uses the analogy of the mad scientist to demonstrate how these arguments invert the hierarchical nature of concept formation. He explains that such arguments rest on doubting the self evident and readily available concepts in front of us such as rocks and trees and the like, yet take for granted higher level concepts such as electrodes and scientists and the fact that they can go mad.**

**I don't know where you got the idea that it is theoretically possible for all of our senses to be fooled as portrayed in *The Matrix*, but I don't believe it for one minute. Nor do I understand what believing in souls has to do with it. You imply that it is necessary to adopt one form of mysticism to fend off another.**

**Even if one were to accept that it would be possible to do this, there is a major distinction between the possible and the probable. And I certainly don't understand how it would be probable for something like that to occur. Who would waste resources doing such a thing and to what end?**

**Ultimately, these false scenarios posing as valid arguments serve only one function: to cast doubt on Man's ability to know reality. It is an attack against certainty and Man's mind. One must first accept the validity of the senses as valid in order to pursue knowledge. This is an axiom and any attempts to deny it are self-defeating.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Who is to say what perfect is? Is perfection not relative?"*

**A: It is not relative, but it certainly is contextual. The difference being that relative, in terms of philosophy, is the idea that reality is merely dependent on one's point of view. Contextual means that it will depend on which facts of reality one is considering. To ask if something is perfect, one must also ask to what end, by what standard, and have proper definitions for the subject under consideration.**

When one talks about a "perfect circle" or a "perfect square," the end being considered is merely existing as a shape qua shape, the standard of evaluation is how closely each fits its respective definition, and the definition is what makes the idea of perfection finite and limited. A circle is perfectly round if every point along a single curve is the same distance from a fixed point known as the center. A square is perfectly square if each side has the exact same dimension and all corners measure exactly 90 degrees. Who is to say what is perfect in this case? You might ask a mathematician or an architect.

When one talks about perfect health, the end being considered is sustaining Man's life, the standard is that which promotes it, and the definition of health is to be free of disease or injury. Who is to say what is perfect in this case? You might ask your doctor.

What is the perfect pass in a football game? I would say that it would be a nice tight spiral that leaves the hand of the quarterback in such a manner as to connect with his receiver, who then catches it with both hands without bobbling it, and is able to score a touchdown. Is any single catch more perfect than any other? That question is meaningless. If they all meet the criteria mentioned with the intended result, then they are all perfect in that respect.

However, we must also be careful by what we mean when we ask the question "who says so?" In the previous examples, the person saying so was capable of doing so based on the fact that they have knowledge about that which is being evaluated. This knowledge implies a relationship between Man and reality. It implies that Man is capable of knowing and evaluating reality. It does not mean something is perfect merely because someone says so. That would be subjectivism.

There are those who claim that everything that exists is perfect in and of itself. Everything is perfect in its own way, and who is Man to say otherwise? Or quite often Christians will declare that only God is perfect. Both of these claims imply that perfection is something that Man cannot obtain or even know. It implies an aspect of reality that is independent and apart from Man's consciousness. There is no definition, no standard, no limits, and therefore no knowledge possible. This is a form of intrinsicism.

**In short, perfection is a human evaluation about a fact of reality. It depends on reality to exist (existence exists), to be what it is (A is A), and for there to be a standard of evaluation and a mind capable of evaluating it (consciousness is valid).**

**Is everything perfectly clear?**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Can machines think?"*

**A: Since thinking is a process that requires identification and integration, it is dependent on awareness of one's self and reality. Therefore, it must be a faculty of a conscious entity. A machine, in its most rudimentary form, is merely a mechanical device capable of doing work. If one tries to extend this definition to include biological organisms in general and the human mind in particular, you could make the case that a machine does possess this capacity. However, extending definitions is dangerous. They must be finite and limited if they are to have any meaning. Just as saying "art is anything I want it to be" renders the concept of art meaningless, so do we lose the distinction between Man and machine if we do not limit the idea of machines to mechanical (and perhaps electronic) devices—i.e., the man made. As these devices do not possess consciousness, the answer is no—machines cannot think.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Why [should people] ask questions about [things] they don't know anything about?"*

**A: Because asking questions about things that you already know the answers to is a waste of time. People ask questions about things they do not know about so that they can become enlightened and know about them. They ask precisely because they DO NOT know and want to.**

**So, why do you ask?**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "If the written word can be made to speak, what becomes of the metalogical relationship between speech and text?"*

**A: Is "metalogical" even a word? The relationship between speech and text is that, in both instances, they are symbols denoting concepts. Only their form is different. Therefore, the phrase "the written word can be made to speak," is merely a poetic way of saying that one is translating from one mode of communication to another.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Dear Aristotle:*

*(BEAR with me, please) Is it possible to know something with certainty and still not be able to prove it? I am certain that there is no God, but since one cannot prove a negative, I cannot prove this and so when I am in a discussion with a believer in God (provided they are merely mistaken and, in a philosophical discussion, are interested in learning the truth, even if it makes them question their own beliefs), and he or she challenges me to prove the non-existence of God, I don't know what to say. (I can't BEAR this!) Thank you, time-honored scholar!!*

*-Jim Ashley"*

**A: The first thing you could do is to remind them that the onus of proof is upon them since it is they who are asserting a positive. The second thing you can do is actually prove it ("what is this you say?") Yes, that's right, you can indeed prove your point.**

**While it is true that proving a negative cannot be done, you can in fact prove a positive which, if both it and the existence of God were true, would lead to a contradiction. We already know that contradictions do not exist (hopefully you won't have too much trouble proving that logical truth to your opponent if he is honest), so anything that results in a contradiction and has no proof to support it must necessarily yield to the supposition that does has proof supporting it.**

**There are a great many things which would contradict the existence of God, but my personal favorites (since they hold the most weight in my own mind) are the argument favoring the primacy of existence view of the universe combined with discussion of the basic axioms and the nature of consciousness. The absolute truth of these ideas makes the non-existence of God irrefutable.\**

**I would suggest reading the first and third chapters of *Objectivism: the Philosophy of Ayn Rand* as well as the book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* and becoming well versed in these areas. With this ammunition you should do just fine.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**

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*Q: "Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology describes the formation of higher level concepts which are integrations or subdivisions of lower level ones. Yet not every higher level concept is an integration or subdivision of lower level ones. 'Value', for example, is higher level (it is a derivative of 'life'), but does not seem to be an integration or subdivision of any earlier concepts. Is that correct?"*

**A: No, it is not correct. All higher level concepts follow the pattern of being a derivative of lower level concepts including the concept 'value'. Just as the concept 'furniture' is a higher level concept subsuming the lower level concepts chair, table, couch, bed, etc., the concept 'value' subsumes all lower level concepts that are beneficial to Man's life and which he would act to gain or keep. These include food, shelter, money, friends, love, etc. The idea that 'value' is a concept that cannot be reduced to its constituent parts is the intrinsic theory of value which today's conservatives would have you believe. In their view, what constitutes value is found directly in reality without relation to Man's existence as dictated to them by God or society.**

**Your Friend in Reason,  
Aristotle**