

DEFINING THE OBJECT

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“What we see is not reality in itself, but reality exposed to our method of questioning”

- Werner Heisenberg

INTRODUCTION

Reality, as perceived by an individual, is what that individual considers to be the state or fact of being real. Reality can be considered the entirety of actual physical truth but it is impossible for a human being to fully comprehend this, at least in an objective manner. If we say perception is entirely subjective, then we must then say reality as perceived by an individual is entirely subjective. If our perception of reality is entirely subjective, we can never be entirely sure that the perceived reality is the same as that of objective reality. Our subjective reality is formed through our experiences in objective reality and what we understand to be the state or fact of being real is what we have accepted as such based on our sensibilities.

PART I: THE ABSTRACT OF DEFINING THE OBJECT

Object

- *noun* a material thing that can be seen and touched.¹

The written language we use defines one word with a combination of other words and in this way other words provide a literary context for the word we seek to define. To define something we may make a statement about its fundamental character, its meaning. We might make an attempt to distinguish or bring clarity by defining something. By defining something we set parameters of meaning within the context of a specific language.

Define

- *verb* 1) state or describe the exact nature or scope of. 2) give the meaning of (a word or phrase). 3) mark out the limits or outline of.²

As previously mentioned, we can only define the word *object* with other words. The definition as well as the word *object* are stuck in the quicksand of the abstracted literary world, sinking further and further away from that the words seek to describe in each attempt to surface into the physical world. Words bear arbitrary relations to the actual physical object. But it can also be said that the word is an object in its own right.

In some sense the words of spoken and written language are defining the object in a generalised manner, however, the act of generalising is inherently problematic. For something to have a specific and actual identity, its every aspect and characteristic is

1 Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition

2 Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition

important, in its individuality and uniqueness. To generalise we must ignore some of this actuality. It is a reductive and diminishing act and it is necessary in order to define an object using the written and spoken language.

This, however, is not entirely dissimilar to the visual perception of an object, in that we have selective vision and that we are biologically predispositioned and culturally conditioned to see only limited aspects of the physical world. In this respect our visual perception may even be as limited and reductive as defining the object in a literary manner.

Perceive

- *verb* 1) become aware or conscious of through the senses. 2) regard as.³

To perceive an object we have only to become aware of its existence, whereas to define an object it is suggested by the language we use that we should be aware of and be able to communicate its nature and meaning. By the dictionary definition of *define* another person becomes important in this process. If we are to observe an object, we are looking at a specific physical entity in a specific time and place, which by perceiving we provide ourselves with a definition of. When we perceive an object we have to be aware of at least one of its aspects, which we may define ourselves. We do not necessarily derive meaning from that aspect we perceive. We can simply be aware of its existence. If we are to perceive an object we must surely be accepting that it has a physical presence and is part of our reality; we are defining the object as real. Any further definition of the object may follow.

SURFACE

We can define an object in terms of our visual perception of its physical aspects. We see the light reflected off the surface of the object onto the retina of the eye, which the brain interprets as a continuous stream of information. We perceive the surface of the object and can break down this perception into constituent aspects as means of defining it with language.

The electromagnetic spectrum is the known range of electromagnetic radiation, which can be said to be energy and momentum, which interacts with physical matter, such as objects. Light is the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum. Light interacts with the surface of the object and, on a simplistic level, it can be said that particular wavelengths are reflected from the surface. The subatomic characteristics of the surface determine the resultant wavelengths, which are perceived as colour by the observer. The spectrum of visible light is continuous but in order to define colour with language, the spectrum is commonly divided into smaller spectra of red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet. If all wavelengths are absorbed, we see the colour of the object as being black and if all wavelengths are reflected then the colour we see is white. Our definitions of basic colours, commonly primary and secondary colours, are culturally conditioned, and are for the most part, universal within that culture. Further than this, there are huge discrepancies in definitions of colour.

³ Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition

We can, therefore, define objects in terms of colour, although this is evidently problematic. The arbitrary prefixes to colours, such as 'leaf green' or are particularly useless due the vast range of greens, and indeed other colours of leaves. The language we use in our definitions of colour are not adequate to communicate colour beyond a culturally conditioned set of basic colours.

The surface of an object also has a texture, which is a name we give to the tactile quality and visual pattern of the surface. The visual appearance of texture is perceived by much the same method as colour; in that it is derived from the light scattered from the surface of the object. This is the nature of visual perception; colour and texture are conceptual entities and are properties of surface. Texture is the physical composition of the object at the surface level. However what we consider to be surface level depends on what scale we perceive it at. For example, texture is also structure on a microscopic level, however, this is not visible to the unaided human eye. When we define texture as a tactile quality, we are describing how the surface feels. Visual perception is a remote sense, whereas tactile perception is a mechanical sense. The process of sensing an object through touch, mechanically, is quite different than the remote visual perception of an object. The appearance of the object lends itself to many assumptions that we can affirm or contradict through physical contact.

Physical contact with the object assists us in perceiving its material reality and helps define it to the greatest degree we are capable of. How a surface feels is how the sensory cells in our fingertips, for example, sense touch, pressure and also temperature, in relation to movement across the surface. This is due to friction which can be defined as the resistance to movement between two surfaces in contact with each other. Two contacting surfaces are actually partially fused together on an atomic level. The degree to which the two surfaces are fused is dependant on the atomic composition of the two surfaces in question, as well as environmental variables, particularly temperature.

We can define the object in terms of its weight. Weight can be defined as the heaviness of the object which is the mass of the object under the influence of the force of gravity. Without the aid of external devices, weight is the perception of tension in the muscles counteracting gravity. We cannot visually perceive weight. We can, however, visually perceive the effect of weight although this requires motion. Mass can be defined as the physical volume of a solid body. We can assume an object has mass based on the accepted knowledge that anything which can be considered an object has volume. Volume is the space the object occupies. Form is the shape of this space. When considering form we generally presume we are speaking about an object in a tangible state of existence. The perception of form is derived from the perception of surface and we can visually or tactilely perceive it similar way to colour and texture.

Form is texture and texture is form, depending on the scale of our perception. An entire mountain range viewed from a high enough altitude becomes texture rather than form and people are too small to be seen. Conversely, the slightest wrinkle in a person's skin becomes a vast ravine, populated by millions of clearly visible bacteria, when viewed through a powerful enough microscope.

Ultimately, what we perceive is surface; texture and form are the terms we use to distinguish between micro and macro qualities of surface. When speaking about form, we can use geometric terms to define or describe form as a simplification of what we see before us. This is making sense of the complexities of what is visible in order to define and communicate ideas more efficiently. Geometry is a construct we can apply to our subjective reality to create order from the objective reality. Objective reality is generally considered to be too complex for the human mind to comprehend without such structures in place.

A major function of the brain is pattern recognition. When speaking of visual perception, the primary visual cortex of the cerebral cortex is commonly considered to be largely devoted to pattern recognition. Pattern recognition, in terms of the visual, is the ordering, classifying and processing of visual information from the optic nerve in conjunction with knowledge stored in memory. People are particularly adept at recognising the pattern of another human face and this is a common pattern people are familiar with. Recognition of other visual patterns is quite individual as it is based on memory of past visual experience. When speaking of three dimensional forms, such as people's faces, we can use the term object recognition as opposed to pattern recognition although the same principles apply.

Object recognition is a fundamental aspect of visual perception that allows us to very quickly define whether an object is of use or whether it is a threat. This is correlated with the perception of other stimuli including movement, smell and sound. On recognising an object or type of object we can define certain characteristics and its meaning to us based on existing definitions. When encountering a new object, we instinctively make associations with other objects we have previously experienced. An innate curiousness may attract our attention to an object that is unusual or previously unknown to us.

We make associations between objects. This can be explained from a neurological perspective by Hebbian Learning theory. This states that stimulus A, or let us suppose the visual perception of object A, triggers a particular pattern of synapses to fire and causes an array of conscious thoughts. Stimulus B, let us say the visual perception of object B, triggers different synapses to fire in another pattern causing different conscious thoughts. However once object B is associated with object A, the perception of either object may trigger the firing of both patterns of synapses. The more frequently we think about certain things the stronger certain patterns of neurons being fired becomes and therefore, the stronger the associations. These associations can be transient; patterns can also break down with lack of use. The process of making associations is individual and can be attributed to past experiences in life.

Once we have a visual awareness of an object or type of object, we have a tendency to disregard information from the optic nerve and rely on the memories we have. This makes us more likely to notice new possible dangers or food sources on an innate, primitive level, or other things that we regard as important. We can presume we have a finite memory capacity, as our brain is constructed of finite matter. If we were to remember every detail, this finite capacity would be reached much sooner. Besides being visually attracted to novel objects, our attention is directed to things that we as individuals value at any moment in time and it is this prioritising system in our minds which governs how we direct our gaze.

VALUE

Value is a precondition which may limit our perception of an object. It is our expectations, ultimately, which limit us. Value is a term we use to indicate perceived worth or usefulness, which varies from one person to the next.

From a materialistic point of view, an object only has value in terms of other objects, services or money. Materialistic value is certainly not limited to monetary worth, although this is obviously the most prevalent in capitalist society. From this materialistic perspective, the focus of attention or emphasis is on the material thing to the exclusion of non-material things such as thought. Thought is not physical matter and cannot be owned, bought or sold like material things. A phenomenon of materialism is the desire to possess the material thing. This desire to possess the object will consequently place a relative value upon it. A desire to possess objects, although not necessarily governed by, may be related to monetary value, potential or prescribed.

Value can also be sentimental, which may be considered irrational from a materialistic point of view. Such objects may be regarded valuable by an individual for personal, emotional reasons and another individual may not necessarily identify with that value. This is because the memories the sentimental object evokes will be unique to individual experience. Sentimental value can be inherited from a person in such a way that the object becomes a surrogate physical entity for that person. The fundamental difference between sentimental value and materialist value is that sentimentality retains the notion that the object is a surrogate or a substitute for the things which are otherwise not physically there. If materialist value were to be deemed of more importance, then the physical object itself would be of greater consequence.

There is also aesthetic value. What we consider to be of aesthetic value is a visual appearance we find pleasing. Aesthetic appeal may also be considered beauty, although the concept of beauty is not confined to aesthetics. Aesthetic value is another highly individual and subjective concept.

The purpose an object can have is another type of value. Purpose can be said to be an objective. On a purely survival level, purpose would be defined in terms of food and shelter for an individual. Once beyond survival level, purpose is highly individual. The value assigned to the object may be determined by its purpose, which is determined by an objective. The object can be considered a tool to achieve this objective and its value is determined by how much the individual desires this objective. It can be said that any object has potential purpose for an individual to realise in a given circumstance.

So in perceiving an object we may define it in terms of value. As individuals hold different values, then consequently, an object is subject to different definitions. Individuals may, however, define objects similarly. It is through the language we use to communicate ideas about the world in general that we find commonalities. The ideas we attempt to communicate about the physical world are our own definitions. They may have originated from another but as we incorporate and reiterate them we make them our own. Due to the subjective nature of visual perception, each person's definition of the same object may be vastly different. Perhaps this assumption proves correct at times. However, it must be stressed that there are no right or wrong answers; there are only opinions. There are, however, popular opinions that certain things are right or wrong in society and we have social codes and indeed laws to enforce these opinions.

CONTEXT

We are all products of the society we live in, having gone through our lives experiencing and being affected by it. Within a society, people must, to a certain extent, share opinions and a degree of understanding of subjective reality and the objects it contains. Cognitive patterns, called memes, can be passed on from one individual to the next. These ideologies evolve in a way somewhat analogous to biological evolution and are passed on from one generation to the next through communication. Some memes survive better than others and can mutate or combine with other ideas to form new memes. They are considered the unit of cultural evolution and a group of mutually supporting memes form a belief system known as a meme complex.

Meme complexes form a context from which we perceive the world. They are ways of thinking where people share ideologies or cognitive patterns and understandings that provide similar vantage points. The memes we have accepted can be deemed the memetic context and is always present; we do not define objects outside of one. Therefore in defining the object, the memetic context provides an ideological framework. An example of a memetic context would be a set of ideas within contemporary art. Examples of a possible memes within such a memetic context would be "painting is dead" or "less is more."

These are examples of ideas or memes that firstly not everyone may be aware of within a given culture and secondly not everyone who is aware of them accepts as being truth, which is typical of the nature of memes. The idea "less is more" could also be considered to be a meme complex due to the supporting ideas from its historical background in minimalism and the works of Ad Reinhardt and others who embrace this meme. Such a meme, or meme complex still prevalent within contemporary art might also be deemed an art history context. Due to the social nature of memes and meme complexes, the memetic context could also be considered the social context or socio-cultural context.

PERSPECTIVE

How we define an object is ultimately in relation to ourselves, the viewer. As egocentric beings we naturally perceive everything with ourselves as the base of reference, the centre of the universe. We see an object as being smaller or larger than ourselves and it's distance from us. Although our eyes are in our head, at the top of our bodies, we know very well the dimensions of our own bodies and the body's current position relative to the ground. The ground is usually our first external point of reference and we may subsequently relate every other physical entity to it. We locate objects in relation to the ground it is upon as the object's base of reference in perspective.

In relating the object, a physical entity, to ourselves, the physical entity we feel most sure about, we juxtapose our relationship with the ground to the object's relationship to its ground as a means of physical reference. Therefore we may perceive the surface the object is situated upon as being as important in relation to it as we perceive the surface we are situated upon to be in relation to ourselves. Hence the characteristics of that surface become important to us in the perception and subsequent definition of the object.

ENVIRONMENT

It is not just the surface the object is on that is important in our definition of it; its whole environment affects our perception and subsequently, our definition of it. The environment, or physical domain we find the object in provides a context for the object. We may perceive the object as being a constituent in our visual field that we perhaps cannot entirely separate from the whole. However, by picking it up and handling it, if this is possible, we make ourselves the object's direct point of reference. By bringing the object into our immediate proximity we reduce the relevance of the environment in relation to the object.

Whatever degree of perceptual awareness we have of an object, we are always aware of the surroundings whether on a conscious level or not. There is no such thing as a neutral environment. A neutral environment would be a vacuum with no light. If the object were in a truly neutral environment, we would not be able to touch the object as we would need protective clothing in the vacuum. We would not be able to see the object due to the absence of light. So in theory, a neutral environment could exist but we would have no way of perceiving an object in it. A white, simple geometric space may often be considered to be a neutral environment but it is likely to have connotations of a modern art gallery for example, and will therefore affect our perceptions of any object in such a space in line with our expectations. In an attempt to simplify the form and reduce the colour of a space to a minimum, it may direct our attention to any object within that space but it does not eliminate the fact that the space has characteristics, they are simply altered. It could be said that to reduce the perception of the characteristics of a space, the light levels should be reduced in order to limit visual perception. This is a common technique employed in museums where exhibits are spotlighted and the surrounding environment is dimly lit. However this does not change the fact that the space has character, although this technique does reduce our awareness of the space and allows us to more easily focus on the object. The physical shape and form of a space, as well as its colour and light levels will provide an environment, a physical context, within which we define an object to be part of.

SUMMARY PART I

In defining the object, we must first accept it as part of our subjective reality and define it as real. We can further define the object in terms of its physical aspects based on our perception of surface. Additionally, we can define the object in terms of geometry; a structure we employ to make sense of a complex objective reality. The brain is adept at pattern recognition and object recognition which allows us to classify and therefore define the object. We make associations between objects; we can define the object in terms of another object. We can define the object in terms of its perceived values. Furthermore, we can define the object within a context, such as a memetic context. We perceive the object with ourselves as a base reference and the object's environment also defines it.

PART II: DEFINING AN OBJECT

With regard to *One and Three Chairs* (1965) by Joseph Kosuth, it is apparent that there may be three different realities of a chair: an actual physical reality of a chair, a photographic representation of a chair and a dictionary definition of a chair. Therefore, in this context, we have three definitions of a chair; a definition of the actual physical

reality of a chair, a definition of the representation of a chair and a dictionary definition of a chair.

With this in mind, I attempt to define an object; one which is part of my subjective reality. The object in question is also a chair:



Firstly I define the chair as part of my subjective reality. It is not necessarily part of your subjective reality, I do not presume you accept it as real. Secondly, I have defined the chair in terms of the above representation. I can further define the chair using a literary language, beginning with a dictionary definition.

Chair

- *noun* a separate seat for one person, with a back and four legs.⁴

This is a very general definition of a chair, which is vastly inadequate when speaking of a specific chair. What follows is a less general, and therefore more subjective definition.

⁴ Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition

SURFACE

I can describe the colour of the chair as light blue with a tint of purple. I might alternatively describe it as pale bluey-purple, pale purple-blue or pale lilac. I can say that it is shiny and that it has a gloss finish; it reflects the daylight from the window quite brightly. I know the chair has been painted, and can define it as such. The paint used was gloss paint, and was described as "lavender" by the paint manufacturer. In my opinion, the colour of real lavender does not appear to be similar to the colour of this paint. Initially the chair was unfinished wood and I can tell you it has been painted several times, although this may not be apparent. If I try to recall its previous colour, I seem to remember it was once dark blue, although I cannot be sure of this. I cannot further remember the previous colours of the chair accurately due to the relative unimportance. The underside of the seat of the chair has not been painted, although this is not apparent from the image of the chair in appendix A. At the edges of the underside of the base, and where the chair legs join it, there are paint splatters in a multitude of colours. These paint splatters evidence the history of the colours of the chair.

The colours of these paint splatters include a light blue, which is a darker hue than the pale lilac colour it is at present, an even darker blue, black, pale yellow and a hideous pink colour. At the edges, the paint layers have built up gradually over the years of being repainted and form a ridge of solidified paint which extrudes from the rest of the unpainted chair.

The texture of the chair of the chair is smooth to the touch due to the many layers of gloss paint. It is not perfectly smooth and the surface has slight protrusions and indentations. These too, are smooth to the touch as they have been painted over more than once. I would describe the surface as having an irregular smoothness. Along the top right edge of the seat, viewing it from the same perspective as the image in appendix A, there are quite a few notches or deep grooves, that I would estimate to be a couple of millimetres deep. These larger indentations are very much noticeable to the touch, as well as visually apparent upon inspection. Although I know they are there, I hardly notice them ordinarily.

I can describe the indentations as being part of the texture of the chair although, as previously mentioned, they could equally be considered part of the form. In defining or describing the form, the dictionary definition of a chair summarises this quite succinctly. In order for an object to be considered a chair, it must have a seat. I don't agree that it is necessary for a chair to have four legs to be considered a chair; it might have any number of legs.

However, I do agree a back rest is part of the definition of a chair, otherwise it would be a stool. The quoted dictionary definition defines what we might consider a standard chair, or a classic design of a chair, such as the one in question. It has a seat, four legs and a back rest. The seat is mostly flat, slightly concave and has curved angles. The chair legs have crossbars joining each pair of legs at the sides of the chair and a central crossbar joining the two side crossbars. I know that this design of the chair holds the legs in place more firmly, making the chair stronger. The chair might, therefore, be defined as well made. The backrest is slightly curved and is held in place by five supports, the outer two being thicker than the three middle ones. All the legs, crossbars and backrest supports have been lathed with the legs and back rest supports having particular aesthetic patterns. Due to the nature of lathing, the designs are circular in nature and appear as concentric rings or grooves in these structures.

I can define the chair in terms of its weight as it is a substantial piece of furniture, although light enough to easily carry. If I didn't already know it was made of wood, I might guess by estimating its volume from its form, in relation to its weight, that this quantity of matter I am picking up is quite likely to be a material such as wood or similar density. I probably wouldn't think the chair was made of a metal of similar density to wood as I would expect it to be much colder to the touch.

From picking the chair up, I could estimate the weight of the chair to be about four or five kilograms from my knowledge of relative weight measurements, although this may not be particularly accurate. I could more accurately define the chair in terms of these units of measurement by measuring it with scales.

Recognising and defining this object as a chair, I associate it with other chairs and compare those chairs with this one. I define this chair as being relatively old in comparison with most other chairs I am familiar with. I associate this chair with objects other than chairs, such as the radiator which is painted the same colour, or my clothes which I sometimes pile upon it for example. This chair may bring to mind any number of things at any given moment. I might think of the cat who likes to sit underneath it and wonder if he has shredded the wallpaper recently.

In defining this chair in terms of materialism, I could say that it is my chair and that I own it. I might define it as my material possession, although its material nature is not what is of most or all important to me. In terms of aesthetic value I would firstly define the chair as not being aesthetically offensive. I would define it as having an aesthetically pleasing form and colour coordinated with the room it resides within, hence aesthetically fitting or suitable, although this is also not so important to me. Aesthetically, it is more important that any object in my living space is not an offensive colour such as pink. I would also describe the chair as having a degree of sentimental value, primarily due to its age, I have memories associated with it.

The purpose of the chair however, is the most important value from my perspective. It is a functional object and indeed is multifunctional. Its main functions include a structure to sit on; its intended function, a structure to stand on to reach objects too high to otherwise reach, and also a structure to put objects, such as clothes, preventing them from being on the floor where the cat may be more likely to sleep on them. Therefore I primarily define the chair as a useful, functional object.

The chair can also be defined in terms of its context. From the perspective of this essay, this essay is its context. Any further context must be provided by you, the reader.

Defining the chair in terms of its environment, I can say that it furnishes the room it is in or even that it is a part of the room. The chair might be defined as a permanent feature of the room but nothing is permanent. I could easily take it out of the room to use in another room; it is not a feature of one room in particular. If I were to say it was a permanent feature of the house, this would be as equally flawed as when I move house I will likely take it with me. In many years to come, possibly beyond my life time, the chair may not even exist in the physical state it is in now; it may rot and decompose into other forms of matter and energy or perhaps be burnt to ash in a different transformation of matter and energy. Perhaps the chair may even be remade into another piece of furniture, or a completely different item, or perhaps even a sculpture with no other purpose than to be itself.

Permanency is as determinable as the future. Energy and matter are constantly changing forms and we can never absolutely determine the future. The future may appear to be predictable, to a certain extent, by recognising patterns and predicting the repetition of such patterns. However, due to the objective nature of reality, we have no way of absolutely predicting something we cannot fully comprehend.

SUMMARY II

I can show you a representation of the chair and describe it in detail in order to communicate my perception of its nature and its meaning to me, but it is impossible to form your own subjective reality of the chair without actually perceiving its physical reality yourself. You may have a greater understanding of the chair, having had it described to you. You would likely recognise it from its picture and definition here, but without seeing it for yourself you will not know for sure it is real; any definition of the chair you derive may not be based on reality. If a definition is not based on reality then it is fiction, or at best, speculation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, defining the object is subjective, individual and relative. We can define many aspects of the object but ultimately we can never achieve an absolute definition of the object, as we cannot perceive the entirety of objective reality. Additionally, due to the limitations of language, definitions of the object will be as limited as the language in question.