



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA
Faculty of Humanities

Datum • Date • 18 May/18 Mei

Die Departement Filosofie nooi u vriendelik uit na 'n colloquium
The Department of Philosophy cordially invites you to a colloquium

Prof David Spurrett

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“What is the Evidence of the Senses?”

Empiricists reject traditionally 'rationalist' commitment to the possibility of a priori knowledge, and make the positive claim that either in general, or for some specific subject area, we have no source of knowledge besides sense experience. These two commitments are at least partly independent - rejecting a priori knowledge does not entail, by itself, that sense experience is the only source of knowledge. An argument bridging the gap needs to specify what counts as sense experience. Contemporary empiricists tend -- sometimes -- to be suspicious of beliefs justified by means of sense-extending measurement devices. Van Fraassen for example counts the (distant but large) moons of Jupiter as 'observable' but not genes, and argues that while theories referring to genes may be 'empirically adequate' this does not warrant belief that genes are real.

I argue here that no principled criterion can epistemically distinguish biologically standard perceptual systems from augmented versions of such systems (spectacles and telescopes), and from more exotic technologies such as sensory substitution (e.g. mapping visual information on to tactile arrays) and detectors for physical modalities that humans do not standardly perceive (Geiger counters). All are alike in being fallible and lossy transducers of physical quantities into afferent neural activity. The reasons for holding our eyes as a generally useful tool in justifying beliefs are the same as those for the Geiger counter. Those who reject rationalism need other arguments for the conclusion that we cannot perceive ionizing radiation and genes.

Plek/Venue : Geesteswetenskappegebou 20-14/Humanities Building 20-14
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Tyd/Time : 11:30-13:00