



Theoretical Approaches to Sensation

There are several theoretical approaches that have been utilized in analyzing sensation and perception. The reason behind this is that each theoretical approach has a different use for various fields of study. These approaches include empiricism, natural sciences, structuralism, Gestalt psychology, and psychophysical approach.

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Empiricism

A 17th century school of thought, empiricism refers to the claim that the experiences that result from our senses are the sole bases of the knowledge that we gain about the world. Famous empiricists include John Locke, George Berkley and Thomas Hobbes. John Locke was the developer of the notion that states that the mind is a blank slate or a "tabula rasa" upon the birth of a child. As years go by, some ideas of traditional empiricism were disproved largely due to the modern knowledge about how heredity affects experience. However, contemporary empiricism plays a vital role in studying several aspects of sensation as well as perception (e.g. depth, speech, taste perception).

The Natural Sciences

The natural sciences, which include biology, physics, mathematics and chemistry, are considered as basic foundations needed to have a full understanding of sensation and perception and their respective processes. Scientist Ernst Mach was one of the forerunners of natural sciences as useful theoretical approaches when he worked on visual contrast phenomenon and the mechanics of sound.

Structuralism

A theoretical approach developed by Wilhelm Wundt, structuralism is a theory that claimed sensations as individual elements that add up to create perceptions. Wundt was also known as the establisher of the first scientific psychology laboratory in Germany in the year 1879. Structuralists stated that each dot in a structuralist square makes a sensation. The combination of these sensations gives as the perception that it is a square.

Gestalt Psychology

The early 1900s were the beginning years for German psychologists who developed Gestalt psychology [1]. The term "Gestalt" was derived from the German word "Gestalten" which literally means "form". Gestalt psychologists oppose structuralism by stating that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". This proposal says that sensation and perception are founded on the holistic form of a group of stimuli. A classic example of the Gestalt principle is the Gestalt square. Our perception that the object is indeed a square is brought about by our sensation of the organization of the dots, rather than the sensation of each dot as what structuralists imply.

Psychophysical Approach

Psychophysics is another theoretical approach that examines the relationship between the physical attributes of stimuli and the perception it causes. Learn more about psychophysics here [2].

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