

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

I was in the kitchen not long ago when our hard-of-hearing son turned on the CD player very loudly. Being up to my elbows in food preparation, I could not dash in and turn it off. "What IS this??" I wondered, hearing only blaring dissonances and heavy beats. I am hard-of-hearing too, and even with hearing aids can only perceive a limited range of sounds. Most of the sounds emanating from the CD were outside that range, unheard by me. I was about to yell "turn that thing off now!", when Yvain sauntered into the kitchen and asked "Mom, how do you like that Brahms symphony?". I stopped and listened, my mouth still open in readiness to shout. "Oh," I said, after a pause. "That's very nice". And it was. Knowing what it was, I could fill in the missing parts and appreciate the full composition. I could not not fill them in. Yet I was not aware of filling in anything at all. I was hearing the entire work.

Not only do we transform non-aural information into the sounds of music or speech, but more interesting we are not aware of doing it. Often, we truly do not know when we are guessing and when we are not. All information, from whatever sources, is woven seamlessly into a perfect whole.

For a person who has had sufficient experience with sound to know what things "should" sound like, the transformation can be total. Oliver Sacks writes of a young man who had become deaf at age 8. The deaf man is quoted: "from the very first my eyes had unconsciously begun to translate motion into sound. My mother spent most of the day beside me, and I understood everything she said. Why not? Without knowing it, I had been reading her mouth all my life. When she spoke I seemed to hear her voice. It was an illusion which persisted even after I knew it was an illusion". Sacks refers to these sounds as "phantasmal voices".

Such illusions make possible the continued familiarity of voices now silent, the continued appreciation of music only dimly heard. Without this ability, the musical experience of the hard-of-hearing would become hopelessly fragmented, as indeed it is when we are lacking non-auditory clues about it. But with such clues, we can continue to enjoy an art we can no longer perceive by its primary mode.

Another type of aural illusion, is described by K. C. Cole ("The Universe and the Teacup"). Both light and sound, she observes, are perceived by us on a logarithmic scale. "the intensity of sounds ranges over such an enormous range that there's no way you could get a non-exponential system to handle that", she says. The same is true of sight. "The human eye can see a range of well over a million different shades of brightness but we don't perceive the brightest thing we can see as a million times brighter than the dimmest". In fact, all of our senses present the world to us in this "distorted" way. "It could not be otherwise, because only a logarithmic scale can encompass such a huge range of responses".

To be able to appreciate the full range of reality within the confines of our brains is a miraculous thing. But the fact of the matter is, our perceptions do not always represent what truly is. What

we seem to hear is not what we actually hear. It is far more wonderful. What then is the relation between perception and truth? And if God is concerned with truth, how does he justify these distortions?

Truth is a fundamental characteristic of God. His truth "reaches unto the skies" (Psalm 108:4), and "the truth of the Lord endures for ever" (Psalm 117:2). His truth fills all time and space. And he gives it to us in his word: "thy word is truth" (John 17:17). He has also given us the embodiment of truth in his son, the word made flesh: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Truth is clearly at the heart of things, and it is God who gives us the equipment to perceive it. Do perceptions lie? We know that God does not lie (Titus 1:2), yet it is he who gave us our perceptual machinery. If that machinery sometimes presents things to us as being what they are not, is that in order to deceive us, or to enable us to know more? Our ability to apprehend an enormous range of signals suggests that it is not deception but larger truth that God seeks for us.

Even the deceptions that our senses perform are no barrier to knowing the truth, if we genuinely want to find out, because God has given us one more thing to bridge the gap between perception and truth. He has given us reason, and invites us to use it: "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord" (Isaiah 1:18).

We have the ability to analyze, to scrutinize, and to put things to the test. We may learn, for example, that although 70 decibels sounds only somewhat louder than 60 decibels, it represents nearly ten times as much sound energy. We know this because we can measure things.

Thus we have both the scope and the precision to understand and appreciate what is around us. Ultimately, this ingenious design enables us to direct our steps "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13), and expands our scope so that it can include God.

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