

## Understanding Paper – Understanding Myself

- So, I have to take a position about this seemingly-innocent piece of paper, eh?  
“Yes Mr. Reitz, the fate of the world depends on it.”
- The fate of the world?!  
“Well, the fate of your world, anyway.”
- Oh, I see – my world revolves around my self-perception, which is intimately tied to my performance in school, which is intimately tied to my grade in this course, which is intimately tied to my performance on this paper.  
“Exactly.”
- Well then, to me the paper is what I perceive it to be. It’s what I’ve learned, continuously since birth, that it should be. It’s all of these things, and more. Ultimately, “the paper” is what my consciousness, influenced by all of these sources, has constructed within my mind.

Sooner or later, any method by which I might perceive “*the paper*” has to be grounded in my senses. Thus, I might say that the primary method by which I conceive “*the paper*” is through my senses. Through my sense of sight, for example, I am able to reconstruct “*the paper*” as a mental image. It is due to my sense of touch, that I am able to reconstruct the texture of “*the paper*” within my mind. Furthermore, the more limited senses of taste, smell, and hearing also play a role in my reconstruction of “*the paper*”. This sensory input, when combined, helps me to form what I call a *mental image* of paper in general, and of “*the paper*” in particular. My mental image of paper guides the way that I discern paper in the environment. I use my senses to negotiate the physical environment, so in essence, they are the first “*thing*” to make contact with “*the paper*”.

Furthermore, my senses instantly interact with my repository of mental images, and I am able to discern “*the paper*” not only from other papers, but also from other objects. To some extent, it might seem like I’m conceding the existence of an external world. To argue about the external world would entail making arguments that parallel those for the existence of “*the paper*”. Thus, it is sufficient to say that at the perceptual level, “*the paper*” appears to exist separately from myself. Finally, sense perception has become ingrained in my existence. It is convenient for me to rely on my senses as absolute fact. This entails believing that my senses tell the truth, and reasoning through any “*perceptual inconsistencies*” that may occur. Therefore, this typifies my *root* behavior, my “*default*” state of being. To Descartes, “Thought and thought alone cannot be taken away from me [Descartes]. I am, I exist” (Descartes, 334). To me, idea not only typifies how I feel at the perceptual level, but also foreshadows how other areas of thought are intertwined with my discussion of “*the paper*”.

Everything that I do, that can be classified as a behavior, I have learned from my environment. I believe that humans aren’t “*born*” with any *a priori* knowledge. Basically, from a *biological perspective*, we have many innate faculties that, with refinement, allow us to process things such as images, language, and even mathematics. But none of those abilities, nor any knowledge of what exists in the external world, lie within us *a priori*. Thus, there is no doubt that this sort of learning is intrinsically linked with how I perceive “*the paper*”. Everything that I can possibly *do* (or perceive that I’m doing) with paper is merely a learned behavior. Furthermore, my mental image of paper also includes activities that I do with it, such as writing, stapling, holding, reading, etc. Thus, my sense perceptions of “*the paper*” will stimulate my mental image of paper,

which will in turn conjure memories and experiences that pertain to this paper and others like it. For every paper that I put my hands on, my global experience with paper plays an intimate role in how I perceive it. From the perceptual perspective, I want to say that “*the paper*” is just a bunch of sensual perceptions that stimulate a mental image. From the learned-realization perspective, I want to say that “*the paper*” is a combination of my raw sensual perceptions and my learned knowledge. But even that statement doesn’t encompass the entirety of “*the paper*” – there is one more perspective that needs to be explored.

It is this perspective, the one that I call my *consciousness*, that will resolve the questions as to what I’m holding in my hand. I do not hold a definite opinion, or mastery, over my conception of my *consciousness*, but I will endeavor to explain it further. My notions of this entity (if I may be so bold as to call it one), have largely been influenced by Bill Hicks, and more recently by Lao Tzu’s Taoism. It was Bill Hicks, a little-known comedian, who first introduced to me the idea that people aren’t so separate from one another. Consequently, he asserted that we are in fact united by what he called a *collective unconscious*. Furthermore, it was *Taoism* that brought the rest of reality into this picture, implying to me that I might not be so distinct from things like “*the paper*”.

*“Man models himself after Earth.  
Earth models itself after Heaven.  
Heaven models itself after Tao.  
And Tao models itself after nature.” (Tzu, 279)*

In this statement, Lao Tzu demonstrates how all things are innately connected with all other things. Thus, in essence, my *consciousness* is where I attempt to transcend mere sense perception and learning, and strive to reach a higher, more evolved plane. Moving beyond sense perception and learning is the only way that I can attempt to understand the

ideas of Hicks and Taoism. Furthermore, it is also at this stage that I can manipulate the knowledge gained at the lesser stages of the senses and learning, in order to come to grips with the “*larger issues*” surrounding the paper. Like how it, and every other physical object, somehow relates back to me, and shows me my place in the context of *everything*. It is at this level of being, that I can attempt to *see* how I am connected to “*the paper*”, and how it’s place in *everything* affects my own place, and vice-versa. And furthermore, I can move from here to see how I am connected to everyone else, how we all share a common base, and how questioning the existence of a piece of paper can be rendered irrelevant. I exist, as a part of a larger whole that encompasses paper. Thus, we are related, and therefore, “*the paper*” must exist.

– And that’s the end. So, now it’s time for my evaluation, correct?

*“Yes, of course. After considering your argument carefully, I feel that it completely lacked support, foundation, and even sense. You never pinned down the idea of ‘consciousness’, nor did you explore what your so-called ‘mind’ is. Your argument has not proven to me, by any stretch of the imagination, that ‘the paper’ exists.”*

– I expected as much. This soliloquy wasn’t for you. Rather, it was for me. This exercise has forced me to evaluate my own thoughts, and based upon my current state of mind, to generate my current theory on the existence of “*the paper*”. In another ten years, I could be in a totally different place, and be totally ashamed that I even thought this, much less wrote it. But that’s evolution, that’s change, and that’s growth. And it’s what I need to do in order to live.

*Humph. Live indeed.*