

ON WHETHER ZARA SAW A RACCOON

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Preliminaries

Total Time: 35 minutes

Ages: 6-7 years old (first graders)

Materials for Students: none.

Materials for Instructors: *On Whether Zara Saw a Raccoon* by Iman McPherson, assorted optical illusions.

Learning Objectives: Consider how contingent propositional knowledge of the external world is acquired. Explore five alleged sources of such knowledge: inference, authority, revelation, memory, and sense perception. Establish the epistemic primacy of sense perception. Challenge the accuracy of human sense perception; establish that our knowledge of contingent propositions of the external world is not definite.

Introduction

5 min

Personal Introduction: My name is Iman. My name is Monika. We are college students at Tufts University, and we study philosophy.

Introduction to Philosophy: What is philosophy? See if students remember/can come up with examples of “big,” open questions.

Talk about the difference between closed questions (What time is it?) and open questions (What is time?). Philosophers wrestle with open questions that have no settled answers.

Philosophers have different opinions about how to answer these questions. They give reasons to support their points of view. Emphasize “I agree because...”/ “I disagree because...” language. Give example (using this language) or ask students to give example.

Anyone can be a philosopher! Today, we will be doing philosophy, and more specifically, epistemology.

Introduction to Epistemology (review): Epistemology is the study of how we know things and why we know them.

What is the difference between an opinion and knowledge? What does it mean to have knowledge? What does it mean for a belief to *not* be knowledge? How can we prove that we know things? What are some things that you *know*? [Challenge this knowledge; provide counterexamples.] What are some things that no one knows?

On Whether Zara Saw a Raccoon

15 min

Read *On Whether Zara Saw a Raccoon* (approx. 5 minutes). Follow with discussion.

Discussion Questions: What are some reasons that Zara believed she saw a raccoon? Did Zara *know* that she saw a raccoon? Why or why not? Why does Zara doubt that she saw a raccoon? Is it possible that Zara saw a different animal? At the end, why is Zara confident in her belief? Does Zara know for sure that she saw a raccoon? Do you think that Zara saw a raccoon, or something else? Why?

Optical Illusions

15 min

Have students explore different optical illusions (approx. 5 minutes). Hold up some specific illusions to prompt discussion.

Discussion Questions: What do you see in this picture? Does anyone else see something different? Is it possible for two people to see the same picture in different ways? Who is “correct”?

Is it possible for our eyes to mislead us? [For example, seeing a still picture as “spinning.”] Could this happen in real life, not just with illusions? Can you remember a time when you *thought* you saw something, but you were wrong? Can our other senses mislead us? How do we know that what we touch/see/hear/smell/taste is accurate? [Counterexample: Dogs can hear much higher-pitched tones than we can. If someone blew on a high-pitched whistle, to us it would sound like silence, but a dog would be able to hear it.]