

In a field of sunflowers, five creatures were arguing about who it was best to be.

“I would hate to be a mole,” said the crow to the mole. “I can see for miles, as clear as can be. But you are half blind. What a pity you can never know what the world really looks like.”

“I would hate to be a crow,” said the dog to the crow. “I can smell where my owner has walked hours after he has gone. But you can hardly smell the difference between a cat and a dog. What a pity you can never know what the world really smells like.”

“I would hate to be a dog,” said the fly to the dog. “I can taste anything through my feet as soon as I land. But you can hardly tell one tin of food from another. What a pity you will never know how wonderful the world really tastes.”

“I would hate to be a fly,” said the bat to the fly, standing so that the fly could see her. “I can tell how juicy a moth is by the way it bounces back the sound of my cries, but you have no ears at all. What a pity you can never know what the world really sounds like.”

“I would hate to be a bat,” said the mole to the bat. “I can feel a footstep at the other side of the field. But most of the time, all you feel is the air. What a pity you can never know what the world really feels like.”

As they argued, the sunflowers kept turning their heads round to face the sun.

## Senses

This scene, which raises questions about perceptions and whether we can know what the world is “really” like, is a merging of two ideas.

One is the Indian folktale of a group of blind men who touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each touches a different part, so when they compare notes they disagree – the one who touched the tail thinks it is like a snake, and the one who touched its tusk thinks it is like a .

The second is an article which is often used in undergraduate philosophy courses, “What is it like to be a bat?” by Thomas Nagel. It considers how no matter what we learn about the “how it works” of being a bat, we can never experience the “what it’s like” from the inside.

In this scene, all the creatures think that they have the final take on reality through a sharpened sense. Children’s knowledge of the extremes of the animal kingdom may enrich the discussion – that some animals see colours or hear sounds that we can’t detect, or can find their way to the same place on enormous migrations using senses science has only recently identified.

The connections between perception and reality are interesting scientifically as well as philosophically, and you might be able to tie this in with a wider unit of work.

One way to explore the stimulus is for the children to decide which creature they would prefer to be and why.

You may get questions about whether it is better to be blind or to be deaf, which might be interesting in extending children’s powers of empathy. You might do a follow on exercise ranking the senses in order of how important they are for an understanding of the real world. Of course, if you have children who are or have family members that are hearing or visually impaired, this might be rather sensitive – and it’s easy to kid yourself that you are giving a child the chance to speak to his experience when you may be reinforcing his status as an object of curiosity.

Or you could pursue the line of how our senses tie up with reality using some of these questions (perhaps with a “dividing line” game).

Which is more real?

- the feel of an ice cube or the way it shines?
- a ball dropping to the floor or the sound it makes?
- the weight of an apple or its colour?
- the flavour of an orange or its colour?
- a person in a dream or a person in a painting?

Some snakes can see whether something is hot or cold. So do they have a better understanding of what the world is really like than we do? Do plants like the sunflowers turning to face the sun have “senses”, or is that nonsense?

Can we ever know what the world is really like? How/how not and why/why not?

Or you could explore the notion of illusions and the reliability of the senses. A particularly fascinating experiment to follow this up is to get kids to notice how huge the moon looks when it is close to the horizon compared to when it is up in the sky. Has it got bigger or closer, or is there something else going on?

There’s also a rather charming picture book called “Duck! Rabbit!” by Amy Rosenthal and Tom Lichtenfeld of two children arguing about the famous ambiguous image. (Google “Duckrabbit” to see it).