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A Moderately Intelligent Post, or: Your Brain Has No Idea What's Going On

May 28, 2008 · [No Comments](#)

When you tell people you study (or studied) psychology, almost without fail you can expect something along the lines of, “Hey, watch out! Don’t be analyzing me!,” or some derivative thereof. Since most people are okay enough (give or take), and I try to be decent and sensitive even to people with ridiculous beliefs (like, say, in an interventionist god), I don’t say anything like, “What in chance’s blue earth would make you think I spend *any* of my time thinking about your issues, or dedicating my life to learning about certain individual idiosyncrasies that are essentially meaningless to the vast majority of people who really just need some food and education options...Here, your dad was an asshole and didn’t hug you enough - his dad didn’t hug him either - forgive him, forgive yourself, done.” This is obviously sarcastic and more than a bit acerbic, but you get the point. There are many incredibly valuable therapists and counselors and psychiatrists out there who help people lead fulfilling lives...It’s just that I’ve met very, very, very few.

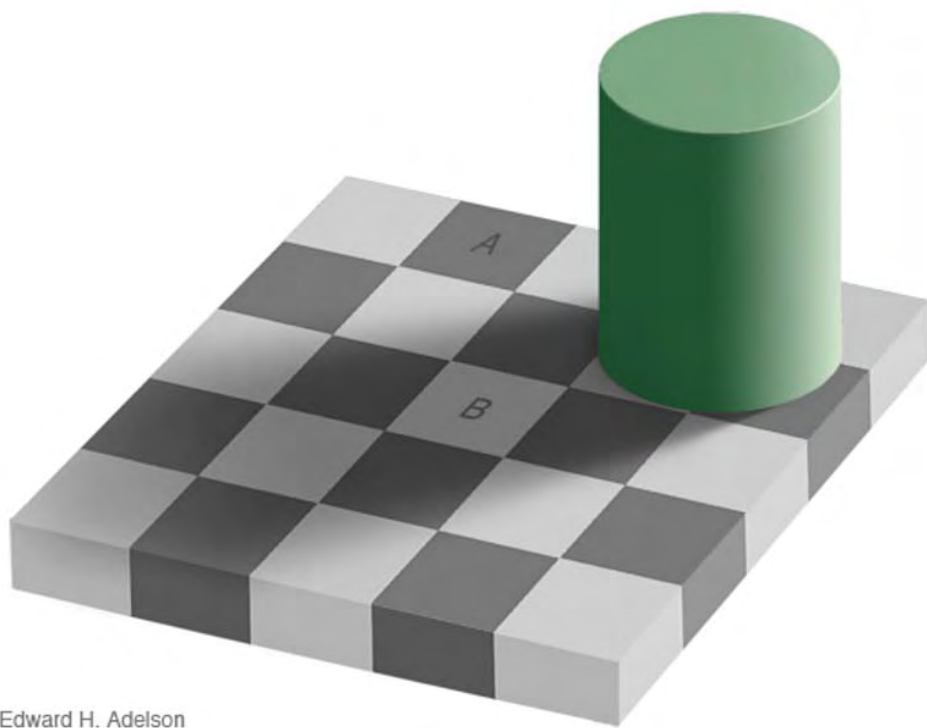
What interests me about psychology (in its scientific form), is its ability to bridge all possible gaps between people, whether we’re talking about different “races” (a ludicrous concept with no biological basis), different nationalities, different religious or spiritual beliefs, whatever...My first inkling of this in any form of literature was in some of the simplest examples of visual illusions: necker cubes, milgram line-tests, etc. Gradually, it became clear that the easiest way to introduce people to certain concepts in psychology was through illustrations of the common mistakes made by all people (I know, I’m glossing over huge differences, cultural and otherwise, but those just amount to different looking mistakes for the same reasons). Today, the fields of Behavioral Economics, Social Cognition, Social Cognitive Neuroscience, and a few more are basically paradigms composed of examples of systematic human biases, prejudices, and illusions.

It seems to be extremely difficult for most people to grasp and believe evidence that might “lower” them to the level of animals (or, lately, that raises animals to the level of humans). The problem, then, is that we *are* animals, composed of basically the same parts and nerves and neurotransmitters and, not least, the same brain, and therefore cognitive processes, as apes and monkeys and dogs and cats. That’s fine, most people don’t need to believe any of this. In fact, this is probably a good thing, as some of the truth of the matter is incredibly depressing if you don’t pull the thread the whole way through, which is hard and takes a long time. However, for the sake of argument, and because of [a terrific article](#) I bumped into today (what, I worked all kinds of hours

the last couple days, have a cold, cooked my bro and his lady buffalo burgers...you couldn't tell I blog on idle? Shhhiiiiiiiiittt, like Clay Davis).

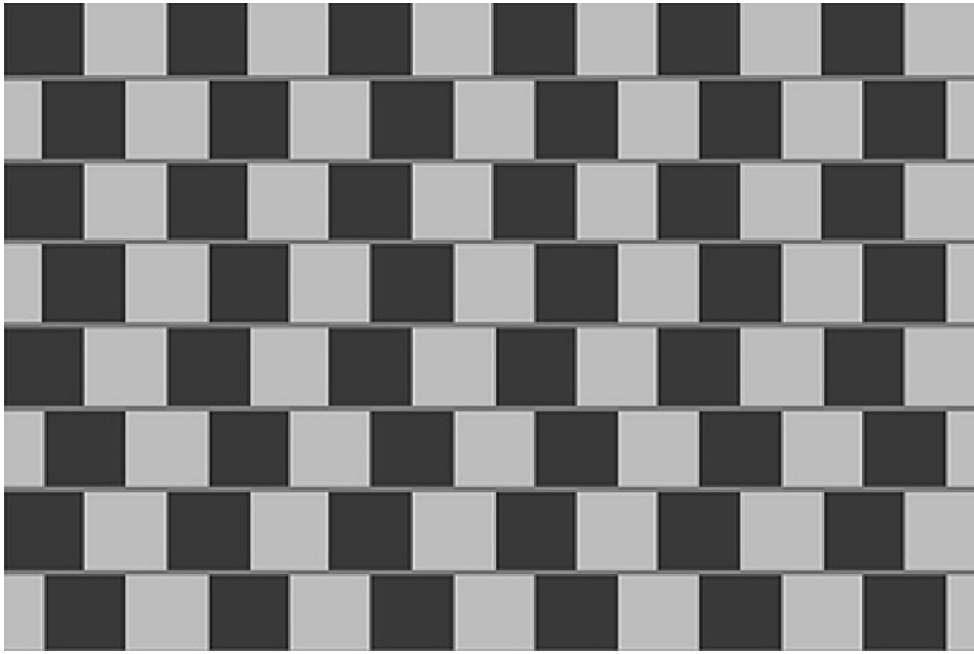
The above mentioned (and linked, go read it!) article is from [Scientific American](#) and is on visual illusions and cognitive neuroscience, which points out the fact that nothing we process (hint, hint) through our sensory apparatus is actually *what is really out there*, i.e., your brain has no idea what the world is really like. Once again, like our friends above who think we're created in "god's" image, the fact that we don't know what is really going on is fine. After all, we need to survive, not comprehend the universe in its actuality (just ask a string theorist, huzzah!). I'm going to stop rambling, because I'm tired and on cold medicine, and don't really even remember writing the last couple paragraphs. But I'll leave you with a couple of those illusions. For the explanations, consult [the article](#), I'm lazy. [To those of you who skipped this instead and just looked at the pretty pictures, good for you. If you read this, I apologize, but you should know by now there is nothing of value coming out of my mouth, er, my fingers.]

This one was created by [Edward Adelson](#). The color of the squares on which A and B are printed are the same shade of gray, perceptions to the contrary.

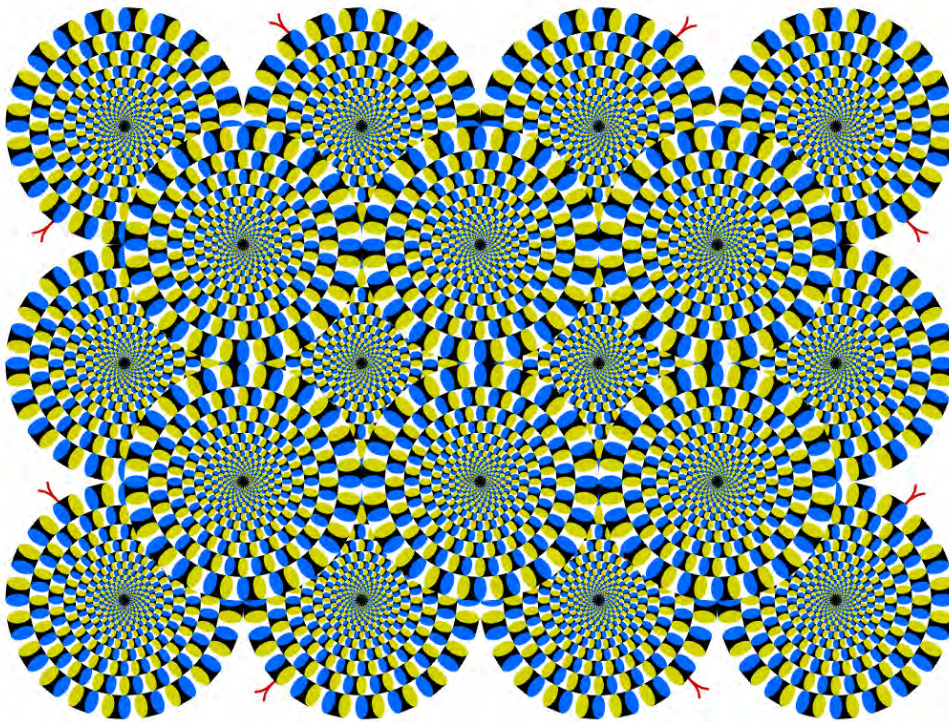


Edward H. Adelson

The second example was discovered by [Richard Gregory](#). The tiles in the picture are all perfectly level and straight, though you can't make yourself see it that way without extreme difficulty.



Finally, my favorite, created by [Akiyoshi Kitaoka](#). Guess what, nothing is moving. If you stare at one of the black dots in the center of the circles you can stop the illusory movement. Just bad-ass.



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