

# Why Errors of the Senses Cannot Occur: Paul of Venice's Direct Realism

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on Paul of Venice's realist theory of direct knowledge. In the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century human knowledge was standardly viewed as a process of abstraction enabling the human intellect to grasp the essences of corporeal things, regardless of the matter in which they are embodied. This process was achieved thanks to the mediation of mental entities (*species intelligibiles*) representing the dematerialised objects in the intellect. By the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, some authors began to regard this account as unsatisfactory. These authors held that assuming the existence of mediating species (considered themselves as objects of knowledge) amounts to thinking that between ourselves and the world there is a barrier preventing us from acquiring knowledge of reality in itself. Paul of Venice is aware of the sceptical accusations made against the theory of species in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, he is a firm advocate of the existence of species. He claims that knowledge, despite coming about through species, is not indirect. Quite the contrary: we have immediate access to reality, and the individual objects that constitute it, precisely because our senses (which are purely passive) receive impressions direct from outside, thanks to species. He points out that species are not object of knowledge. They are not known at all during the cognitive process, as they are a mere means (a mechanical means, so to say), not an image nor a representation of anything, and therefore they are no obstacle between ourselves and the world. Thus, we are able to know reality exactly as it is in itself and, under ordinary conditions, our perceptions are practically infallible and cannot produce false knowledge.