

# University of California

## Subject A Examination

### May 1992

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**DIRECTIONS:** Read carefully the passage that begins on the next page and the essay topic that follows. Respond to the topic by writing an essay that is controlled by a central idea and is specifically developed.

You will have two hours to read the passage and complete your essay. You may underline the passage and make marginal notes as you read. Plan your essay before you begin writing. Allow time to review and proofread your essay and to make any revisions or corrections you wish.

Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of your ability to develop your central idea, to express yourself clearly, and to use the conventions of written English. The topic has no "correct" response.

**PLEASE NOTE:** You may use the "Notes" side of the blue Information Sheet to plan your essay and you may request blank paper from the test supervisor to prepare a draft. These materials will be collected separate from your essay booklet; the readers of your essay will not see them. To be scored, your final essay must be written on the pages of this booklet.

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*Introductory Note: The following passage is adapted from an essay by Stephen Jay Gould, who teaches biology, geology, and the history of science at Harvard University.*

## **Some Close Encounters of a Mental Kind**

Certainty is both a blessing and a danger. Certainty provides warmth, solace, security -- an anchor in the unambiguously factual events of personal observation and experience. But certainty is also a great danger, given the notorious fallibility -- and unrivaled power -- of the human mind. How often have we killed on vast scales for the "certainties" of nationhood and religion; how often have we condemned the innocent because the most prestigious form of supposed certainty -- eyewitness testimony -- bears all the flaws of our ordinary fallibility.

Primates are visual animals par excellence, and we therefore grant special status to personal observation -- to being there and seeing directly. But all sights must be registered in the brain and stored somehow in its intricate memory. And the human mind is both the greatest marvel of nature and the most perverse of all tricksters.

Eyewitness accounts do not deserve their conventional status as ultimate arbiters, even when testimony of direct observation can be marshaled in abundance. In her sobering book "Eyewitness Testimony" (Harvard University Press, 1979), Elizabeth Loftus debunks, largely in a legal context, the notion that visual observation confers some special claim for veracity. She identifies three levels of potential error in supposedly direct and objective vision: misperception of the event itself, and the two great tricksters of passage through memory before later disgorgement -- retention and retrieval.

In one experiment, for example, Loftus showed 40 students a 3-minute videotape of a classroom lecture disrupted by 8 demonstrators (a relevant subject for a study from the early 1970s!). She gave the students a questionnaire and asked half of them: "Was the leader of the 12 demonstrators ... a male?"; and the other half, "Was the leader of the 4 demonstrators ... a male?" One week later, in a follow-up questionnaire, she asked all the students: "How many demonstrators did you see entering the classroom?" Those who had previously received the question about 12 demonstrators reported seeing an average of 8.9 people; those told of 4 demonstrators claimed an average of 6.4. All had actually seen 8, but compromised later judgement between their actual observation and the largely subliminal power of suggestion in the first questionnaire.

Thus, we are easily fooled on all fronts of both eye and mind: seeing, storing, and recalling. The eye tricks us badly enough; the mind is infinitely more perverse. What remedy can we possibly have but constant humility, and eternal vigilance and scrutiny?

At the age of fifteen, I made a western trip by automobile with my family: I have specially vivid memories of an observation at Devils Tower, Wyoming (the volcanic plug made most famous as a landing site for aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). We approach from the east. My father tells us to look out for the tower from tens of miles away, for he has read in a guidebook that it rises, with an awesome near-verticality, from the dead-flat Great Plains -- and that pioneer families used the tower as a landmark and beacon on their westward trek. We see the tower, first as a tiny projection, almost square in outline, at the horizon. It gets larger as we approach, assuming its distinctive form and finally revealing its structure as a conjoined mat of hexagonal basalt columns. I have never forgotten the two features that inspired my rapt attention: the maximal rise of verticality from flatness, forming a perpendicular junction; and the steady increase in size from a bump on the horizon to a looming, almost fearful giant of a rock pile.

Now I know, I absolutely *know* that I saw this visual drama, as described. The picture in my mind of that distinctive profile, growing in size, is as strong as any memory I possess. I see the tower as a little dot in the distance, as a mid-sized monument, as a full field of view.

In 1987, I revisited Devils Tower with my family -- the only return since my first close encounter thirty years before. I planned the trip to approach from the east, so that they would see the awesome effect -- and I told them my story, of course.

In the context of this essay, what follows will be anticlimactic in its predictability, however acute my personal embarrassment. The terrain around Devils Tower is mountainous; the monument cannot be seen from more than a few miles away in any direction. I bought a booklet on pioneer trails westward, and none passed anywhere near Devils Tower. We enjoyed our visit, but I felt like a perfect fool. Later, I checked my old logbook for that high-school trip. The monument that rises from the plain, the beacon of the pioneers, is Scotts Bluff, Nebraska -- not nearly so impressive a pile of stone as Devils Tower.

And yet I still see Devils Tower in my mind when I think of that growing dot on the horizon. I see it as clearly and as surely as ever, although I now know that the memory is false.

Of course we must treat the human mind with respect -- for nature has fashioned no more admirable instrument. But we must also struggle to stand back and to scrutinize our own mental certainties. This last line poses an obvious paradox, if not an outright contradiction -- and I have no resolution to offer. Yes, step back and scrutinize your own mind. But with what?

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**ESSAY TOPIC:** How does Gould attempt to shake our belief in the credibility of what we see or remember seeing? To what extent does his essay convince you to doubt what people perceive and remember? To develop your essay you should discuss specific examples from your own experience, your observation of others, or your reading -- including "Some Close Encounters of a Mental Kind" itself.

