

What it really is to perceive

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Abstract

With this brief article I shall attempt to arrive at a definition of perception starting from the outlines of the metaphysics currently available to us on the topic. To this end, I argue that at the foundation of the various theorisations in the philosophy of perception there is a general agreement concerning the nature of the perceptual relation, but not concerning the nature of its relata—that is, the objects of perception. Once the transcendent nature of these relata has been established, the nature of the perceptual relation as a whole will become clear, and I will show *en passant* how theories surrounding the discovery of mirror neurons, if properly understood, provide a framework consistent with my discussion of perception and the related definitions.

Keywords: Philosophy of Perception; Perceptual Relation; Objects of Perception; Transcendence; Mirror Neurons.[†]

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1 Introduction

In my studies on perception and its metaphysics, I have had the opportunity to interweave three themes of crucial relevance for contemporary philosophy and science, and in particular for the Italian intellectual context: the functioning of perception, the notion of transcendence, and the theorisation surrounding the discovery of mirror neurons [6, 12].

The main theories of perception agree on one point: there must be some form of agreement between the mind and objects independent of the mind [5]. Beyond this point, however, the degrees of disagreement and the questions concerning the nature of perception as a whole and of its objects vary significantly. Strictly metaphysical theories debate the issue while setting aside the problem of the objects of perception and move closer to the idea that even if mind and world are two distinct things, genuine perception requires the emergence of a direct contact when mind and world are in agreement. In this way, the long-standing dispute between direct realism and indirect realism is also set aside [11].

Indirect realism establishes that mind and world are two distinct things. Direct realism establishes what happens when mind and world come into agreement [1]. This distinction also sheds light on the debate concerning illusions and hallucinations, which arise when the agreement between mind and world is merely apparent rather than genuine [10].

2 Defining Perception

Even when surveying the main theories of perception, we can observe that they presuppose a deep agreement, provided that the nature of the objects of perception is not taken into account. Sense-data theory, once the problem of the nature of the objects of perception is eliminated, does not substantially shift the balance of the metaphysics of perception as a whole [7]. That the world in the mind–world relation is constituted by entities such as sense-data does not violate the rule that, in order to perceive genuinely, mind and world must be in agreement.

Adverbial theory maintains that to perceive is to perceive something in a certain way, and thus holds that a genuine perception occurs when perceiving in a certain way corresponds to the way the world is; otherwise, one is engaged in a different mental activity, such as imagination [2]. *Mutatis mutandis*, according to intentionalism, the content of perception consists in the intentional presentation of the world as being a

certain way, and intentionality grounds an unmediated—naïve—relation to external reality [3].

According to naïve realism, there is no mediation between perception and the world; mediation disappears once the relation between mind and world is correctly intentional [1].

It appears that the metaphysics of perception developed so far is substantially correct insofar as it brackets the nature of perceptual objects. However, without addressing this issue, discourse on perception remains incomplete: while the perceptual relation is intelligible, the relata remain obscure [5]. Ostensive reference alone cannot satisfy metaphysical inquiry into perception.

When addressing the nature of mind and world, we are inevitably confronted with the question of substance [9, 3]: what they are and whether they share a common ontological ground [12]. From an external perspective, one may ask whether the objects of perception are ordinary objects or entities of a different ontological kind.

From such a perspective, it becomes evident that sensory modalities such as vision, hearing, and smell do not involve direct contact with the objects themselves. What interacts with the sense organs are light radiation, sound waves, and olfactory particles, not objects *per se*. To insist that we directly perceive independent objects as they are in themselves leads to the implausible conclusion that sensory stimulation gives rise to the immediate appearance of objects through an unexplained transformation [10].

Since perceptual experience is posterior to sensory stimulation, it follows that the objects of perception are not objects as they are in themselves. Both perception and the perceived world therefore transcend reality as it is in itself [6].

Perception transcends the world in two different senses. In one sense, for the reason just seen, it is separate from the world as it is in itself. In another, much stronger sense of transcendence, our perceptual experience is different from our body because there is no sense in which it can be said that our body, in itself, is having a certain experience. If, as we have seen, our body is separate from how objects are in themselves, then there is no sense in which, for example, it is looking at the sky, as can happen to us in our experience.

It is at this point that theories concerning mirror neurons may be viewed in a new light. The hypothesis that the brain functions as a mirror system reflecting external reality extends beyond the strictly motor properties of mirror neurons [4]. While defining the entire brain as a mirror system may exceed the explanatory scope of the discovery, the idea that the brain constructs a coherent experience of the world through embodied simulation is philosophically significant [8].

This conception aligns with the hypothesis of the transcendence of perception: experience is generated by cerebral activity and, in certain cases, by embodied simulation,

thereby reinforcing the view that the perceived world is not the world *in itself* but a transcendent experiential domain.

What seems to be missing from the theory of mirror neurons, at least from my point of view, is the extension of its domain to the second sense of transcendence that has been highlighted, and a move beyond what has so far been a metaphysics centered on the subject rather than on experience [8].

Returning to the metaphysics of perception, once the transcendent nature of perceptual objects is acknowledged, it becomes plausible to hypothesise that the naïve relation between perception and world is grounded in the fact that mind and world share the same transcendent substance, they are both immaterial. This is supported by higher-order perceptions, such as the perception of oneself perceiving something, which present themselves as unified and incontrovertible experiences [9].

From this perspective, sense-data theory, though approximate, retains merit insofar as it acknowledges that perceptual objects are not objects in themselves. Once the nature of perceptual objects is clarified, the metaphysics of perception becomes significantly more transparent.

This is where the novelty of my approach lies. If we consider the relata of the perceptual relation as transcendent entities composed of the same substance, then theories about perceptual activity become plausible, because it becomes understandable how mind and world can merge together to give rise to experience—something that would remain largely obscure, even to common-sense inquiry, if the relata were objects as they are in themselves.

Perception is thus part of transcendent experience. The mind, in perceptual activity, is the mode through which we align ourselves with the transcendent world and participate in experience as a whole. Although these conclusions may appear distant from common sense, they do not disrupt ordinary experience or our practical engagement with the world. Reality remains independent, though not in the sense presupposed by materialism.

3 Conclusions

This article has attempted to complete the metaphysical discourse on perception by incorporating both classical philosophical accounts and contemporary scientific insights. Understanding what perception truly is requires grasping not only the transcendence of the perceptual relation but also the transcendence of its relata. If this account is correct, contemporary humanity may indeed suffer from a form of spiritual

constriction arising from a culture excessively focused on objects and insufficiently attentive to lived experience.

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