

The Purely Relational Theory of Perception

1. The objective of the project.

1.1. One of few things that contemporary philosophers of perception (almost) unanimously agree about is that every perceptual episode (e.g. seeing) at least partially consists in something happening to the subject. What happens to the subject can be specified in various ways, e.g. in terms of brain activity, or in terms of an alteration of the subject's consciousness. Importantly, the happening in question is not merely a prerequisite of perceiving nor a consequence of it; it is a part of what perception is. Simply put, it is part and parcel of perception that something happens to the subject. However, it is far from obvious that this is true. The main goal of this project is to assess the prospects of rejecting it.

1.2. More specifically, the aim of the project is to explore the plausibility and explanatory potential of The Purely Relational Theory of Perception (in short: Pure Relationalism, PR), which was presented by Tom Stoneham in a paper entitled 'A Neglected Account of Perception' (2008). According to PR, perception is a specific type of relation between the subject and the perceived item. On this view, that a perceptual relation comes to hold does not require that the subject undergoes any change whatsoever (unless as a consequence of perception, or as a prerequisite of it). Hence PR denies the widespread conviction that perception at least partially consists in something happening to the subject.

2. The research to be carried out.

2.1. The goal of the first stage of the research is to determine the theoretical costs of PR. What are the central commitments of PR? What follows from them? To what extent can Stoneham's formulation of PR be refined and enhanced without changing it into a completely different theory? This part of the research will focus on determining what the proponent of PR can and should say about the following: (a) what sets the mental phenomena apart from the non-mental phenomena, (b) what exactly is the role of the nervous system in perceiving, (c) what exactly happens when one undergoes a conscious perceptual experience. Next, the theoretical benefits of PR will be determined. Given the commitments of PR, are there any good reasons to prefer this account over other theories of perception? Finally, an answer will be given to the question of whether the theoretical benefits of PR outweigh its theoretical costs.

2.2. The research will be conducted in accordance with methodological standards of contemporary empirically oriented analytic philosophy. The research tasks will be accomplished by analyzing logical relations, assessing the validity and soundness of arguments, assessing counterfactual conditionals, thought experiments, as well as critical analysis of the results of empirical experiments. Well-established empirical data will be inserted into premises of philosophical arguments to determine the extent to which PR fits and predicts empirical data.

3. The reasons for choosing the research topic.

PR casts doubt on certain claims that are commonly accepted in contemporary philosophy of mind, and for this reason it is often discarded as implausible. Nevertheless, the results of initial research suggest that: (a) PR is not obviously false; (b) PR is a potential source of new and interesting solutions to central problems in contemporary philosophy of perception (including the fundamental nature of perceptual experience; the role of the nervous system in perceiving; unconscious perception; the influence of one's beliefs, emotions and desires on the way perceptual experience is like for one from the first-person perspective; the difference between perceiving and thinking) as well as some other significant problems in the philosophy of mind (including the relation between various ways of describing the mind; the mark of the mental; the nature of consciousness).

4. Expected results.

The realization of the research tasks will result in substantial contributions to current philosophical debates about (a) the nature of perception and perceptual experience, (b) the mark of the mental, (c) types of explanation in psychology and the philosophy of mind, (d) the nature and function of consciousness.