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Exploring Strawson's Causal Theory of Perception

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Abstract: *Strawson's causal theory of perception primarily focuses on how we use perceptual concepts and the nature of perceptual concepts. This paper first discusses the fundamental aspects of Strawson's theory, exploring the causal relationships inherent in the perceptual process. Secondly, it delves into Strawson's emphasis on perception as a reliable foundation for knowledge, examining his theory's response to the problem of illusions. Finally, it reveals his theory's definition of the essence of perceptual concepts, namely that perceptual concepts are fundamentally causal concepts.*

Keywords: *Strawson; perception; causal theory*

1. Introduction

Strawson's causal theory of perception posits that the process of perception involves external objects stimulating our senses, thereby generating our experiences of the external world. For example, when I see a lit lamp, the light emitted by the lamp stimulates my retina, leading to a series of neural activities that result in my impression of seeing the lamp emitting light. But how should we philosophically understand this process, and what is the nature of perceptual concepts? Grice's "Causal Theory of Perception" and Strawson's "Causation in Perception," two consecutive papers, is considered the birth of modern causal theories of perception. These theories engage in a thorough and detailed exploration of how to understand perceptual concepts and the causal relationships involved in perception.

2. The Facets of the Causal Theory of Perception

2.1. Term Definitions and Propositions

In describing the role of perception in the entire system of cognition, Strawson first defines relevant terms. He refers to objective existent objects involved in our perception as "Material object array" (M-array) or "M-facts." He points out that perceiving objects in everyday life involve several propositions, taking vision as an example: (1) seeing M-facts; (2) believing that one can seem-facts; (3) seeming to oneself as if one has seen M-facts. Strawson abbreviates these three propositions as M-perception, M-perception-belief, and M-experience, respectively.

It is important to clarify the meaning of M-experience. In the history of philosophy, the term "sense data" has traditionally referred to a real mental entity and has been considered the foundation of knowledge, leading to various issues, such as Berkeley's argument that we cannot know the external objective world and can only perceive our mental ideas. In the latter half of the 20th century, philosophy gradually shifted away from sense data theories. Grice argued that we can directly perceive the objective world, but sense data need not be entirely discarded. We can better describe the operation of our perception by transforming the term "sense data" into sentences like "It looks/feels to X as if..." to express propositions about our perceptions.[1]

Regarding "causal relationships," Grice suggests that one need not be restricted to terms like "cause" or "reason." Words such as "explain" or "is partly responsible for" are also relevant terms for causal relationships.

Having clarified the meanings of these three terms, we can now examine the relationships between these three propositions. Strawson points out that these three propositions are mutually independent, meaning that "any one of the three conditions can be satisfied without having to satisfy the other two, any two conditions can be satisfied without having to satisfy the third condition."

Strawson further states that there is an implication relationship between M-facts and M-perception,

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i.e., M-perception → M-facts or, in other words, if I perceive M-facts, then M-facts indeed exist. This implication relationship implies that the existence of the corresponding M-facts is a necessary condition for the existence of M-perception. When there is no M-fact in front of me, my perception of the tree naturally does not exist. Strawson calls this relationship "Relation I."

However, there is no such implication relationship between M-perception, M-belief, and M-experience. Strawson terms the relationships between propositions (2), (3), and (1) as "presumptive implication" and uses the symbol ○→ to denote these relationships. Strawson calls them Relation II: M-experience presumptively implies M-perception, and Relation III: M-experience presumptively implies M-belief. The meaning here is that, in the presence of relevant M-facts, when M-belief is true, M-perception is usually also true, or when M-belief exists, M-perception usually exists. The same holds for M-experience.[2] For Strawson, presumptive implication generally means "usually true" or "presumptively makes reasonable," implying that this kind of relationship does not have the necessity of Relation I. However, this relationship does not hold in the reverse direction, meaning that M-perception does not presumptively imply M-belief or M-experience.

From Relation sb and I II, Strawson derives Relation IV: M-experience presumptively implies M-facts, i.e., "For any normative M-array, if proposition (3) usually holds, then proposition (1) usually holds. If proposition (1) implies the corresponding M-facts, then if proposition (3) usually holds, the corresponding M-facts usually exist." Relation III can be used to derive Relation V, following the same reasoning process as Relation IV, i.e., M-experience presumptively implies belief in M-facts. This means that once we have beliefs about a certain object, we usually believe that the corresponding object exists.

In addition to these five relations, Strawson presents his own causal theory of perception. He points out that among these five relations, when we have beliefs about M-experience, we also have a belief that M-experience is the same as M-perception. In other words, our experience of seeing a tree leads us to naturally believe that our perception is also about the tree. Furthermore, we also believe in the existence of corresponding M-facts. The key question is whether there is a relationship such that when M-experience and M-facts coexist, M-perception must also exist. In other words, if a person feels as though they are looking at a tree in front of them, and there is indeed a tree in front of them, can we conclude that they have seen the tree? Grice, and Strawson as well, raises objections to this scenario. Grice points out that M-experience does not necessarily correspond to M-perception; M-experience can be generated even in the absence of M-facts. In the example mentioned earlier, when a person feels as though they are looking at a tree, it is entirely possible that they are not actually seeing a tree but rather a shadow or a pure illusion. For Grice and Strawson, avoiding this situation requires that there must be an M-fact that causes the production of M-experience to ensure that M-experience is M-perception. Strawson considers this proposition to be the foundation of his theory of perception. Therefore, this proposition needs to be analyzed. Let's imagine a scenario: when we place a pen in front of us, when the pen is taken away, we will no longer have experiences related to the pen.[3] Strawson calls this process the "typical or normal feature of our perceptual experiences." The generation of M-experience is due to the existence of corresponding M-facts. When I have an M-experience, I subjectively believe that there is a pen in front of me, and this generally "causally depends" on the actual presence of the pen. Strawson believes that there is a Relation VI, namely, M-experience presumptively implies "M-experience causally depends on M-facts." Strawson points out that this relationship actually means "M-experience usually arises from an appropriate M-fact." Therefore, this relationship does not have the necessity of Relation I. However, Strawson argues that this relationship does not hold in the reverse direction. In other words, even if there are M-facts, M-experience may not necessarily be reliable. For example, when I think I see a pen in front of me, I think I perceive the pen. In reality, this feeling is due to an illusion, and even if there is actually a pen in front of me, the presence of the pen is not the reason for my M-experience. Therefore, this M-experience falls into Strawson's category of unreliability. We can see that the reason why the M-experience mentioned above is unreliable is that it does not correspond to M-perception, and more importantly, the M-perception it generates does not correspond to M-facts. For Strawson, in addition to the above six relations, the most important proposition is: "Specific M-experience is a necessary condition for the corresponding M-perception only when there is a causal dependence between this specific M-experience and these M-facts in the right M-array." Strawson states that "the concept of perception is closely related to the concept of knowledge, and we cannot tolerate someone making correct M-perceptions in this situation just because they are lucky."

2.2. The Complete Plan of the Theory

Grice asks what conditions must be satisfied for us to see an object. For example, when a person sees a clock in front of them, must there be a real clock present? There are indeed situations where a person

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perceives a clock in the absence of a clock, but if a clock is placed in front of them and then removed, their perception does not change. This suggests that the clock and their perception are not related. Similarly, when a person sees a pillar in front of them, they are actually seeing the reflection of another pillar in a mirror, so it is clear that their perception is unrelated to the pillar in front of them.

Strawson compares his propositions and Grice's propositions in the causal theory of perception. He summarizes Grice's theory as follows: "A necessary condition for a person to perceive an object is that their perceptual impression should have a causal dependence relationship with some state of affairs involving that object." Strawson's own theoretical plan can be summarized as follows: "A necessary condition for an M-experience to be an M-perception is that this experience should have a causal dependence relationship with the right M-facts." Strawson believes that further clarification is needed in both his and Grice's theoretical plans regarding the objects involved. For example, Grice's plan may involve too many objects. For instance, when I can see a lamp emitting light, my perception or experience is caused by the lamp.[4] However, in terms of causal influence, should we also consider factors such as the cause of the lamp emitting light, such as electricity? Regarding this question, Grice argues that we must limit the range of objects involved in the entire causal process. Grice proposes that "if we are trying to represent the concept of ordinary perception, we should not explicitly introduce materials that people who are fully capable of using the concept of ordinary perception may not understand." Therefore, in the process of our perception of external objects, the objects involved should only be those that exists in our concepts and can be identified. For example, in the process of seeing a lit lamp, we attribute our perception and experience to the lamp emitting light, without considering a power plant as the cause. However, Strawson points out a flaw in Grice's plan, stating that "'For an object to is perceived by X, it is sufficient that it be responsible in any way (or participate in the process of generating X's perceptual impression) when X perceives the object.' This is an unacceptable circular description." Strawson believes that it is necessary to restrict the range of objects involved in the entire causal chain of perception, but his approach is different from Grice's, ultimately resulting in differences between his theory of perception and Grice's.

Strawson emphasizes the proposition as the foundation of his causal theory of perception: "Only when there is an M-fact that causes the production of M-experience can it be ensured that M-experience is M-perception." In Strawson's terms, this proposition means that "M-experience causally depends on M-facts" is a necessary condition for "M-experience being M-perception as it seems." Based on this, Strawson goes a step further and points out that the former is not only a necessary condition for the latter but also a sufficient necessary condition. Strawson views this assertion as the basis for restricting the range of objects.

Strawson reconsiders Grice's plan. In Grice's argument, even if a specific, changeable, and matching M-experience is produced by special means, it does not necessarily lead to M-perception. Strawson points out that this would mean that the fact that M-facts are the cause of M-experience does not necessarily ensure the occurrence of M-perception. Thus, an additional condition is needed: if M-experience is produced by a capricious intervener, such as through experiments that result in illusory perceptions that do not correspond to actual perceptions and are highly variable with no regularity. Such situations are excluded from normal circumstances. It is important to note that Strawson emphasizes the need to avoid such situations not because of external interventions but because of the "capriciousness" involved. For example, people can use reliable tools to perceive external objects, such as using a telescope to see distant objects; such stable interventions are acceptable to Strawson. Strawson also points out that the concept of an "intervener" often appears in the history of philosophy in dualist theories of perception, such as in Descartes' thinking, where the existence of "God" ensures the reliability of experiences in the mind.

With this additional restriction, we can see the complete plan of Strawson's causal theory of perception. M-experience, under conditions other than those produced by a capricious intervener, is caused by M-facts. This means that the existence of M-facts leads to M-perception that is consistent with the content of M-experience. For Strawson, this plan ensures that perception is a reliable belief in the external world and a reliable guarantee of our knowledge.

3. Confronting the Challenge of Illusions

In the realm of philosophical inquiry into perception, the questions surrounding illusions and hallucinations have persistently challenged various theories of perception. Observing a bent oar in water, for instance, immediately prompts us to realize that what we see is not the true form of the oar. However, when we witness a departed friend appearing before us or believe we can perceive the bones within our

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hand, we may fail to recognize that we are undergoing hallucinations. Illusions and hallucinations pose a fundamental question: Are illusions, hallucinations, and normal perceptions essentially the same, and how can we differentiate between genuine perceptions and those that does not align with reality?

Strawson primarily addresses the issue of hallucinations, wherein perceptions and experiences arise in situations entirely devoid of corresponding facts. Concerning hallucinations generated not by external factors but possibly by the state of one's own brain, a pressing question emerges: should the brain be considered the cause of perception and experience? For instance, when our memory falters, leading us to perceive something that once existed but exists no longer, Strawson's solution lies within the concept of "naïve perceptual concepts."

Within the realm of naïve perceptual concepts, Strawson introduces two innate concepts: "range" and "masking." Objects within the scope of our everyday perception possess a defined range. For example, we can see a glowing lightbulb in front of us, yet simultaneously, we do not perceive the distant power lines and power plants supplying electricity to it. Similarly, objects from the past do not manifest themselves in the present, and distant objects do not appear proximate. The concept of range illustrates this, while masking implies that we can see our hand but not the bones and blood vessels within it. Under the influence of these two concepts, we can selectively choose causal facts that could give rise to a certain M-experience. For instance, if I were to see a departed friend before me or perceive the bones in my hand, the analysis above would allow us to conclude that both scenarios are impossible. Consequently, we would not select erroneous M-facts, thereby ensuring that our perceptions remain unaffected by hallucinations, establishing themselves as reliable sources of knowledge.

"From a perspectival standpoint, specific concepts within the inherent concepts of perception, i.e., the causal conditions for objects to be perceptible, rely on being within the unobstructed range of relevant sensory organs." This implies that, upon scrutinizing the features inherent in naïve perception, we can distinguish between perceptions and experiences induced by hallucinations. For instance, as mentioned earlier, in cases where hallucinations arise due to the state of one's own brain, resulting in the perception of non-existent objects, Strawson points out that "this experience is undoubtedly, to some extent, related to the current state of his own brain; but he cannot see his own brain because it is not within his field of vision...". Therefore, for individuals perceiving non-existent objects, they "...have seen nothing at all, hence looking no M-series." However, Strawson does not entirely exclude objects beyond the scope of naïve perception from his theoretical framework. Instead, he suggests that with the assistance of technical means, we can extend beyond the limits of unmediated sensory perception. For instance, through X-rays, we can see the bones in our hand. Yet, "any such aided or indirect or mixed perceptions are evidently derived from unaided or non-indirect perceptions, or depend on them." This means that perceiving the bones in our hand through X-rays results not solely from our brain's state but also from the relevant actions of X-rays.

4. Exploring the Essence of Perceptual Concepts: Conceptual Analysis

4.1. The "Kantian Argument"

Before discussing conceptual analysis, let's address Strawson's alternative theory of perception, termed the "Kantian Argument" by Child. It posits that the existence of objects is the cause of our perception of them, a concept implicit in our pre-theoretical framework. We see perception as a way to comprehend independently existing things, assuming its general reliability. This assumption of universal causal dependence means that our fleeting perceptions are treated as perceptions of continually and independently existing things; if these things didn't exist, we wouldn't perceive them.

Child emphasizes that this argument hinges on viewing perception as a reliable means of grasping the objective world. Thus, perception relies on the objective world rather than subjective thoughts. The idea of perception's dependence on the objective world equates to a causal link between perception and the objective world.

The Kantian Argument involves the idea that perception is a reliable means of obtaining information about the external world. The question arises: how do we define this means? If we consider perception as a reliable path to knowledge, then conceptually, experiences caused by perception are reliable as well. This leads to the idea that experiences, like perceptions connected to the external world, are also influenced by external objects.[5] In the views of Strawson and Grice, explaining this influence as a causal relationship is the most plausible interpretation, the one that aligns most with reality. To bolster the notion of perceptual causation, Strawson offers further evidence: subjective experience and objective existent

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objects belongs to different categories, and their connection can only be explained through causal relationships.

4.2. Analysis of Perceptual Concepts

In Strawson's theoretical framework, the analysis of causal relationships involved in perception has always focused on the conceptual analysis of perception and objective objects. The causal theory of perception is not intended to propose a scientific theory but to dissect how we use concepts. Strawson's purpose in presenting the causal theory of perception is to "determine how the concept of the causal dependence of sensory experience in the perception of material objects on facts about material objects fits into, or is accommodated within, or stands in relation to, our naive or common-sense conceptual scheme."

For Grice, the causal theory of perception aims at "elucidating or describing ordinary concepts of perceiving material objects." Regarding the issue of the range of objects involved in perception, it can be expressed more precisely as which concepts of objects can be included in the causal relationships of perceptual concepts. For example, if we see a glowing lightbulb, should the concept of the power plant be included in the analysis? Grice argues that the causal theory of perception should not incorporate "material that users of the ordinary concepts might not know," meaning that when analyzing a particular perceptual concept of something, we should not and do not need to go beyond the concepts involved in current perception. However, Strawson suggests that the causal relationships involved in perceptual concepts are "implicit in our pre-theoretical framework." In other words, the concept of causality is naturally embedded in human thinking, serving as a presumption or premise when using concepts. Here, the difference between Strawson and Grice lies not in determining which aspects of perceptual concepts should be included but rather in Strawson's exploration of the conceptual framework of human thought, which he terms "conceptual schemes." Strawson has stated that when philosophers analyze concepts, they should also explain how concepts are used.[6] In this regard, the causal theory of perception is inherently part of people's conceptual schemes, even if individuals are not consciously aware of it; this theory continues to operate. In contrast, from Grice's perspective, the causal theory of perception only becomes apparent when actively analyzing perceptual concepts.

Nonetheless, Strawson still faces a challenge, which is the issue of the range of objects involved in the causal theory of perception, as mentioned earlier. Which objects are part of the causal process that constitutes perception? Can different meanings of M-facts emerge in the same circumstances? For instance, if my perception is caused by a distant white object, but that white object is, in reality, a house, can it also be said that my perception is caused by the house, and is there a distinction between these two statements? Do they imply contradictory situations? Strawson introduces the concepts of "excess description" and "corrected description" to address these issues. For the scenario described earlier, Strawson considers "my perception is caused by the house" as an excess description. This description is correct, as it simply means "involves a more comprehensive identification or a more advanced characteristic description," whereas the opposite is a "corrected description," signifying that the description of M-perception contains characteristics not present in M-experience. For instance, my experience might be that I see a white house, but in reality, it's a blue house. What does this mean for Strawson's framework? Strawson must further refine the details of his theoretical framework: "M-experience is the most specific M-perception it looks like," where "most specific" can be understood as the most basic in the perceptual description or the same part between the corrected description and the original description. "I see a house" is the so-called "most specific" M-perception. However, this scheme seems to fail in the case of hallucinations because, in the case of hallucinations, the generation of M-experience depends entirely on one's own state, rendering even the most specific M-perception ineffective.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of perceptual causation is based on the relationships between perception, facts, and experience in our entire conceptual system, rather than on actual or physiological perception.In conclusion, as long as we analyze our perceptual concepts, we will discover that the entire process of perception is a chain of causality, beginning with objectively existing objects and ending with our experiences.

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