

We-Intentionality at the Core of Human Perception

There is no doubt that *perceiving* is a necessary condition of *agency*.

For doing something, especially doing something successfully, presupposes knowledge about the antecedent circumstances of the action in question. Otherwise, success in agency would be at best accidental. There would be no firm tie between the agent's movement and its outcome, nor between intention and result. But the very concept of action requires that there be such a tie. This is a conceptual truth. It does not rule out the possibility of an agent's failure or of her accidental success in singular cases. But it is conceptually impossible that these be standard cases. That is why a lot of action verbs are achievement verbs. However, the knowledge required for successful action is primarily acquired through sense perception.

In other words: Perceiving is a necessary precondition of *acting*, because the concept of human agency rests on a certain connection between the intention or goal of an action, on the one hand, and its result, on the other. I.e., that intended and actual outcomes of human action usually coincide is not an accident but a result of prudent behavior. But prudent behavior rests on knowledge about the actual state of affairs in the agent's environment, and it has to be gathered through her senses.

So there can be no doubt that *perception* is a precondition of action, that is, an *empirically* necessary prerequisite of *acting*. Human actions are thus based on perception, or to be more precise: on veridical perception. The corresponding intensional reading of that claim concerning a conceptual relation between (veridical) perceptions and (successful) actions must be also valid, at least *ceteris paribus* and even though, occasionally, a certain movement that is not based on perception might yet be an action. So, in general actions are based on perceptions, and successful actions are based on veridical perceptions, and this implies that true or veridical perceptions are a necessary condition for successful actions. It follows that being able to perceive is a prerequisite of being able to act successfully.

In action theory, this overall idea of the relation between perception and action is usually embedded into a concept of a linear order which runs from sensory inputs (the stimuli) via some kind of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processing and resulting in the selection of an adequate reaction, including its bodily (motor) realization. The core, or at least the essential moment of the whole process is usually taken to be thought or cognition, whereas perception and action are seen not only as separate from each other – and from the higher processes of cognition as well, but also in a determined temporal and functional order. Susan Hurley calls this widespread picture of the relation between perception and action the 'sandwich view of mind'.

Given this overall conception, the idea of an intrinsic, and in some sense transcendental relationship between perception and action, and between the corresponding abilities, seems to be ruled out from the outset, and with it a non-empirical, or non-statistical, transcendental reading of the above claim namely, that perceiving is a condition of the possibility of agency in a more Kantian sense, because both, perception and action, have a common *form* in some sense to be specified.

But this rather Kantian claim seems to be difficult, anyway. For, if perceiving and acting would have a common form in one sense or the other, agency would also be a condition of the possibility of (human) perception.

But this seems absurd, especially in the light of the following considerations: How could agency be a condition of the possibility of human perception,

- if acting is chronologically later and functionally dependent on the results of perception?
- if the ability to act evolves both ontogenetically and phylogenetically later than the ability to perceive?
- given that perceptions fall under the norm of truth, but actions under the norm of the good?

Nevertheless my claim will be: Agency is a condition of the possibility of human perception. An argument for this contestable claim might run like this: Human perception must have a form that makes

possible effective and efficient human agency including coordinated and cooperative actions. Human perception must be of a form that fits the characteristic mode of human behavior, that is, action.

So my claim is that we cannot understand human agency, especially not coordinated and cooperative actions, unless we understand the special characteristic and peculiar mode of human perception, including the possibility of joint reference or attention, of perspective taking and changing, and of shared perceptions. That means that we cannot understand human agency unless we understand the special kind of we-intentionality which lies at the core of human perception. And, vice versa, we cannot understand human perception unless we understand the peculiar mode of human agency, especially of co-operative agency, shared intentionality, and we-intentions.

My proposal is, that understanding the formal interrelation between human action and human perception is the, or at least one key for understanding of the mentioned phenomena of human perception.

Here are some arguments:

1) Perceiving is a motorly active or physical process; receptive abilities are active bodily abilities. The movements of eyes, head, hands, feet, and body are not an external factor, or a hindrance to perceiving properly but necessary and constitutive. This has been shown experimentally, and it is one of the central claims of some of the most advanced empirical theories of perception,¹ especially of so called sensorimotor accounts of perception.

It follows that sensory inputs and bodily movements cannot be as separate as the traditional picture tells us. Rather, they are intrinsically interconnected in the very process of perception. How exactly they are interconnected – for example as patterns of sensorimotor contingencies and their laws, as K. O'Regan and A. Noë propose, or as commonly coded, distal reference feature codes of perceptions and action plans, as B. Hommel et al. propose - is a topic for further empirical research.

2) All our actions are guided by perceptions. Otherwise an effective and efficient acting would be impossible: Actions would actually run blind without being perceptually informed about the relevant bodily and environmental preconditions, their progress and consequences.²

So "... the process of perceiving both presupposes and affords active behavior and performing an action both relies on and produces perceptual information."³

It follows not only that the bulk of our perceptions is acquired, if not 'produced', by actions but also that our receptive abilities typically develop in the course of acting and in this way are formed to the peculiar human kind of perceiving abilities. So although there is no doubt that there is an innate, species specific, biologically determined faculty for shared intentionality or mode of we-intentionality at the level of perception too, it needs the course of acquiring and actualizing of human receptive abilities by actions, inclusive collective actions, for the development of the peculiar mode of human perception (joint reference or attention, perspective taking) and the peculiar phenomenology of human perceptions, i.e. the form of the phenomena of our perceptions, the identities, similarities and differences we perceive.

¹ O'Regan/Noë; Prinz/ Hommel/ Müsseler ...

² Dewey 1896, Gibson 1979, Hommel et al. 2001

³ Hommel et al. 2001, S. 860.