

The Case for a Stimulus Account of the Senses

With his 1962 paper *Some Remarks About the Senses*¹, H. P. Grice introduced the question by which criterion we distinguish our five senses into the contemporary philosophy of perception. The literature concerning this question is not very numerous but the discussion is still alive and was lately inspired by the volume *The Senses*².

There are four acknowledged possible answers to the question how we distinguish the senses, all of them already stated by Grice:

- (1) The senses are distinguished by the properties we perceive by them.
- (2) The senses are distinguished by the phenomenal qualities of the perception itself or as Grice puts it “by the special introspectible character of the experiences”³.
- (3) The senses are distinguished by the physical stimuli that are responsible for the relevant perceptions.
- (4) The senses are distinguished by the sense-organs that are (causally) involved in the production of the relevant perceptions.

Most contributions discussing this issue reject answers (3) and (4) in a very short argumentation. Nearly all philosophers writing on the topic vote either for answer (1) or for answer (2). Accordingly, most part of the debate regarding the initial question takes the form of a dispute between these two positions.

As an argument for one position and to vindicate the case against the rivalling position, often special cases and unknown abilities are introduced into discussion, a strategy not uncommon in the philosophy of perception. I will take a closer look on two of these special cases and abilities, the case of TVSS and the ability of echolocation in humans. The TVSS is an experimental, artificial device designed to improve spatial orientation of blind persons. It consists of a camera that takes pictures of the surroundings and a part that is worn on the back. The part worn on the back communicates the picture by vibration of little pins to the skin of the subject wearing the TVSS. Echolocation is the ability to detect the location of an object and properties like size and texture of an object by means of sound and ears. This ability has been discovered in blind persons, but also sighted persons can be trained to echolocate.

I choose these two cases since these are existing cases regarding human perception. Questions concerning animal perception and thought experiments involving martians and other special beings will not be addressed in this talk.

I am going to claim that these cases, when taken seriously, should lead us to support a position towards the initial question which is not usually taken seriously by philosophers, a position combining (3) and (4) of the above listed possible answers.

Echolocation is brought into the debate by Lopes in his *What Is It Like To See With Your Ears?*⁴ He is a proponent of answer (2), which says that we distinguish our senses by the phenomenal qualities of the perceptions.

By introducing echolocation Lopes wants to show that proponents of answer (1), who hold that the senses are distinguished by the properties we perceive by them, are not able to explain special cases and unknown abilities. Specifically he argues against Dretske, an adherent of answer (1). I agree with Lopes that we can not describe the case of echolocation in a satisfactory way, if we accept answer (1). Dretske rejects Lopes criticism⁵. His rejection relies on a distinction between directly perceiving and indirectly perceiving. As I shall demonstrate, the rejection fails since there is no common and systematic preexisting usage of such a distinction.

Although neither Lopes nor Dretske seem to notice, the case of echolocation shows yet another position to be false: I am going to argue that human echolocation also speaks against Lopes's own position. How we describe the case of echolocation depends essentially on what the scientists find in their experiments. This position seems also to be accepted by Lopes since he extensively cites psychological contributions to the topic. If the scientists tell us that perceivers use sound waves and their ears to detect the location of objects, we will say that they found out that people can hear the location of objects. If the scientists tell us that ears and sound waves are of no importance for this ability, we will say that the tested individuals do not hear the location of objects. What the subjects themselves tell us about their ability is not relevant for the question whether we call it hearing or not. If, however, the introspective character of the experience was essential for distinguishing the senses, as answer (2) claims, the subjects' reports would have to be the most important factor.

My conclusion is that Lopes and Dretske unintentionally vindicate answers (3) and (4) in introducing and accepting echolocation as relevant to the question how to distinguish the senses.

In the case of TVSS I will present a similar argument. An explanation of the case along the lines of answers (3) and (4), as John Heil⁶ advocates, is the best explanation available.

The lesson to learn is that we should take the neglected answers (3) and (4) far more seriously, if we want to answer the question how to distinguish the senses. One of the few philosophers who did support this position is Heil⁷. Taking his account as background, I am going to indicate how such an account could look like. We will also see what problems such an account will face and how they could be avoided.

- ¹ Grice, H. Paul (1962): Some Remarks About the Senses, In: R.J. Butler (ed.): Analytical Philosophy, First Series, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 133-153.
- ² Macpherson, Fiona (2011): The Senses, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ³ Grice (1962), p. 135.
- ⁴ Lopes, Dominic M. McIver (2000): Reply to Lopes, In: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 60 No. 2, p. 439-453.
- ⁵ Dretske, Fred (2000): Reply to Lopes, In: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 60 No. 2, p. 455-459.
- ⁶ Heil, John (1983): Perception and Cognition, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- ⁷ Heil (1983).