

This is an excerpt from a report on the Perceptual Learning and Perceptual Recognition II Workshop at the University of Toronto, Mississauga in May of 2012, written by Kevin Connolly, John Donaldson, David M. Gray, Emily McWilliams, Sofia Ortiz-Hinojosa, and David Suarez, and available at http://networksensoryresearch.utoronto.ca/Events_%26_Discussion.html

5. How Can Philosophers and Psychologists Most Fruitfully Collaborate?

Much of the final panel discussion focused on what the goals of interdisciplinary work between philosophers and psychologists should be, and how those goals might be best achieved. The panelists and other workshop participants identified three potential goals: (1) to investigate traditional philosophical questions empirically; (2) to construct and test psychological theories; and (3) to develop and clarify the concepts employed in both disciplines. Several suggestions were made regarding how philosophers and psychologists might most effectively collaborate in the pursuit of these goals, and extract maximum benefit from each other's research and expertise.

First, philosophers might benefit from psychologists by simply becoming more familiar with their work. Diana Raffman observed that philosophy of mind is or ought to be constrained, and even directly informed, by psychologists' data and theories. Mohan Matthen and Michael Rescorla mentioned Tyler Burge's allegations that the theories of contemporary naïve realists are inconsistent with empirical findings in psychology (Burge, 2005), highlighting the potential disadvantages of conducting philosophical inquiry into the nature of the mind without sensitivity to recent psychological research.

Second, beyond simply being informed by psychological research, philosophers might also play a role in setting the agenda for that research. Cecilia Heyes noted that the institutional incentives in psychology discourage theoretical work in favor of experimentation (though Rescorla noted that some theoretical work is being actively done by psychologists, for instance Susan Carey's 2009 work on concepts, leaving a vacuum for others to potentially fill. Fiona Macpherson proposed that philosophers might use their skills in conceptual analysis and theory

building to help psychologists construct theories and devise experiments to test those theories. This could make it much easier for philosophers to probe traditional philosophical questions empirically.

However, two problems were raised for this second suggestion. Heyes argued that psychologists are not always interested in the questions philosophers are asking and may not want philosophers to help set their research agendas. She cited questions about phenomenology as an example of questions that would not be of interest to most psychologists. She warned that philosophers sometimes want psychologists to pursue an agenda that “is not in the nature of their discipline to be pursuing.”

Additionally, Andreas Keller pointed out that philosophers tend to want scientific theories to be stated partly in terms of the concepts that figure in traditional philosophical questions, whereas psychologists often prefer theories that elide those distinctions in favor of a simpler but still powerful explanatory framework. Thus the philosopher’s preference for psychological theories that have obvious relevance to philosophical questions and the psychologist’s imperative to construct theories with the theoretical virtue of simplicity may put them at cross-purposes. Heyes agreed, expressing skepticism that the best scientific theories of the mind that we can devise will be of clear relevance to the kinds of questions that philosophers want to ask.

Third, workshop participants from both fields suggested that psychologists might benefit from philosophers through the kind “conceptual therapy” philosophers can provide. Rescorla and Matthen emphasized, for example, the potential benefit to psychology of an appreciation of recent work on the nature of representation. Heyes suggested that psychologists would be more

welcoming of assistance from philosophers if it were targeted at the kinds of questions that psychologists are already interested in.

Fourth, and finally, perhaps philosophers and psychologists can aid one another by simply providing a fresh pair of eyes, problematizing assumptions that from a different theoretical perspective may seem obvious. Heyes mentioned an example from the workshop itself: Louise Richardson (philosophy, Oxford) asked a question during the Q&A following her talk that led her to question an assumption that she had previously taken to be obvious.

References:

Burge, Tyler (2005). “Disjunctivism and Perceptual Psychology”, *Philosophical Topics*, 33: 1–78.

Carey, S. (2009). *The Origin of Concepts*. Oxford University Press.