

## On Cavendish's Perception

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### ABSTRACT:

Even though Cavendish's theory of perception can pass the test of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy to show that it is a theory with explanatory power, however, there is a problem within the theory which I call the demarcation problem. Considering the epistemological stance of Cavendish's theory, it is a version of 'Indirect Realism'. Yet this stance will give rise to the demarcation problem, which means that we cannot tell the difference between self-knowledge of our body and perception through her theory. In reality, these two kinds of experiences are qualitatively different and of different objects. I argue that the problem can be resolved by manifesting that perception involves causal processes while self-knowledge of our body does not. Finally, I intend to extend her theory to better understand the workings of perception. Self-knowledge of our body is the foundation of projecting the perceptual field and we perceive the external world as perceiving a bigger me.

**Keywords:** Margaret Cavendish, Perception, Perceptual presence, Perceptual constancy, Indirect Realism

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# 論瑪格麗特·卡文迪許的知覺理論

賴 文\*

## 摘要：

雖然卡文迪許的知覺理論能通過知覺呈現和知覺恆常性的測試，顯示它為一個具有解釋力的理論。但是這個理論本身卻存在劃界問題。她的知覺理論是一種間接實在論，但這種立場將會導致劃界問題：在這種立場下，我們無法藉由她的理論來區分身體知覺和知覺，但這兩種經驗質性上真的截然不同且是關於不同的對象。筆者主張劃界問題可以透過說明知覺帶有因果過程，而身體知覺沒有來解決。最後筆者意圖擴張她的理論以更好地理解知覺運作。身體知覺是投射出知覺場域的基礎，我們知覺外在世界如同知覺一個更大的我。

**關鍵詞：**瑪格麗特·卡文迪許、知覺、知覺呈現、知覺恆常性、間接實在論

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## Introduction

The aim of this article is to interpret Margaret Cavendish's metaphysical and epistemological stance on perception. I intend to argue that:

1) The phenomena of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy have to be explained in every perception theory, the rational perception in Cavendish's term can be introduced to explain these two phenomena. Furthermore, Cavendish's rational perception not only plays an integrative role in perception, but also as a constitutive role of perception. Namely, without rational perception, there is no perception even though sensitive perception functions well.

2) Cavendish's analysis on perception will result in an 'Indirect Realism' in the metaphysical sense. This version of realism signifies that our perception can never enter into the outward world, hence the line between self-knowledge and perception will be unclear since in all cases we can only access our own mental state. The consequence and solution of this problem will be provided. In this section, I also argue that Cavendish separated the matter into three categories instead of one since she holds that sensation and perception are different kind of activity.

3) Our self-knowledge of our body is the foundation of projecting (or in Cavendish's term, patterning out) the perceptual field. The perceptual field can be constituted is because our self-knowledge of our body plays the foundational role. To be more precise, since we know our body arrangement, this knowledge serves as a basis for sensitive and rational matters to pattern out the perceptual field. Hence, the arrangement of perceptual field resembles that of body. In other words, through this knowledge, the perceptual field can exist and contain the figures.

According to Cavendish's view, it seems that most parts of nature have the capability to perceive if and only if one part has self-knowledge and self-motion. Cavendish explained this in the following way:

Though self-knowledge is the ground and principle of all particular

knowledges and perceptions; yet, self-motion, since it is the cause of all the variety of natural figures, and of the various compositions and divisions of parts; it is also the cause of all perceptions (Cavendish 2001, 138).

but perception, as it depends upon self-knowledge, so it depends also upon self-motion; for, without self-knowledge and self-motion, there would be no perception: So that both exterior perceptions, and all interior voluntary actions, proceed from self-knowing, and self-moving matter (Cavendish 2001, 165).

Nevertheless, the focus will be brought exclusively on human's perception in this article.

If a philosopher intends to create his or her own perception theory, then the theory must be able to explain the phenomena of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy since this is an inevitable phenomenon for human cognition. These phenomena can certainly be observed in the activity of perceiving (Noë 2004, 76-8). These two phenomena can be expressed in the following ways:

A. Phenomenon of perceptual presence: when I see a tomato in front of me, I only see a facet of this tomato but I perceive it as a full body including the parts which I cannot sense in this moment.

B. Phenomenon of perceptual constancy: When I see a plate from different angles, I always perceive it as a round plate. Nevertheless, the plate 'really' looks elliptical from most angles.

In presence's case, perception has something which sense does not have. Perception always 'interprets' what sense organ senses when it comes to the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. In this sense, sensation always senses some parts of an object; however, perception grasps the object as a whole and in unified manner. Therefore, the ontological difference between sensation and perception is exactly the reason that Cavendish separated the animate matters

into sensitive and rational matters in my interpretation. We will make this point more detail in section 2.

Perception requires sensitive matter to pattern out the object (sensitive perception) as well as rational matter to pattern out the motion of sensitive matter (rational perception) in order to form perceptual experience on Cavendish's view. The paragraph at below can clarify this view:

While both sensory perception and rational perception involve patterning, they differ according to the type of matter involved; when the sensitive matter in one of the senses of a human (or similar animal) patterns out an external object, sensitive perception occurs; when the rational matter patterns out the motions of sensitive matter, rational perception (in Cavendish's paradigmatic use of that phrase) occurs (Cavendish 2001, 150; Boyle 2015, 439).

In my interpretation, rational perception has a constitutive role and not merely a supplementary one in human perception. If rational perception ceases to function, how can a mere sensation of a facet of a tomato count as perception (this sensation will certainly fails to present itself as a whole to us)? How can we perceive this roundness of this plate even though nearly all the sensations we receive is elliptical? In section 1, these questions will be revisited.

The Indirect Realism's standpoint here is that there is a real world outside of our mind, nevertheless, we can only perceive our mental representation. In this sense, the mind can never touch the reality but only itself. This seemingly indicates that 'interior knowledge' (self-knowledge) and 'exterior knowledge' (perception) have the same metaphysical status. If there is no sharp demarcation between these two kinds of knowledge, will they become the same one? In the light of Cavendish's theory, every part in nature can be separated into inanimate matter, animate matter (Cavendish 2001, 24).

Cavendish's materialism can be seen as monism since she asserted that everything in is matter. Yet, why she conceived that every part is the composition of three different matters instead of one? According to Cavendish: As there is a double degree of corporeal self-motion, viz. rational and sensitive; so there is also a double degree of perception, rational and sensitive (Cavendish 2001, 138). She intended to separate the sensation (generated by sensitive matter) and perception (generated by rational matter). These questions will be discussed in section 2.

Our perceptual field and figures in it can be constituted because we have sensitive and rational perception. Of more importance, self-knowledge of our body exists between our mind and perceptual field as a medium. In my interpretation, because I know every part and arrangement of my body, my sensitive and rational matter can project a perceptual field which resembles my body. This perceptual field can be constituted with characteristics of spatiality and attention-oriented because of implicit self-knowledge of my body. In short, this knowledge is a mirror between my mind and my perceptual field. The analysis will be extended in Section 3.

### **Explain the perceptual phenomena in the shoes of Cavendish**

We can state the phenomena of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy in more specific manner: 1) We only sense a facet of a tomato, but we perceive the tomato as a whole. 2) From almost every perspective, we sense the plate as elliptical; nevertheless, we perceive it as round. These two phenomena have to be considered on Cavendish's view since there really exists the gap between what we sense and what we perceive. In other words, these phenomena are universal for human beings: our perception certainly has 'something more' which sense cannot fulfill. Although these phenomena are stressed by contemporary philosopher (especially phenomenologist), Cavendish's theory still has to pass through these filters. The idea behind this examination is quite simple: If we read her theory through the contemporary lenses, we will better understand her structure of theory of perception. Of more

importance, we can know why she separated animate matter into sensitive and rational matters. This discussion will be stressed in section 2.

In the light of Cavendish's theory, sensitive matter patterns out the object so that we can sense it; rational matter patterns out the motion of sensitive matter in order for us to perceive the object as a whole. In this sense, rational perception plays an integrative role of our perceptual experience (Cavendish 2001, 180-1; Michaelian 2009, 42). From this perspective, we can separate the function of sensitive and rational perception as below: we see a candle in front of us, our sensitive matter patterns out the separated qualities of the object, and through sensitive perception we can sense the heat, color, shape and other qualities separately. Rational matter 'thus' patterns out the motion of sensitive matter so that we can perceive this object as a whole. In this interpretation, the separated qualities of the object are integrated by rational perception, and therefore we can perceive this object in a unified way. As Cavendish pointed out: the Rational parts can make a Whole Perception of a Whole Object (Cavendish 2001, 180-1). This interpretation also indicates that rational perception is a second-order process (in chronological and ontological sense). Namely, when an object or stimulus enters into our horizon, sensitive matter functions in the first place, rational perception comes afterwards. Ontologically, when there is no sensitive perception, rational perception is impossible to occur. This view can be clarified in terms of metaphor: sensitive perception creates the sensation's', rational perception wraps them up for us.

Nevertheless, it is arguably reasonable to say that rational perception not only plays an integrative but a constitutive role. It means that without the rational perception, the mere sensations the sensitive perception gives to us fails to become 'perception'. On this view, without rational perception, we can never have perceptual experience. We can illustrate this by circling back to the two perceptual phenomena:

1) When it comes to the phenomenon of perceptual presence, why can we sense the limited parts of a tomato but perceive it as a whole? Sensitive

matter patterns out the qualities of a tomato, rational perception combines them together to produce the perceptual experience to us. It should be noted that rational perception not only integrates these separated sensations, rational perception also plays a constitutive role in order to combine those ‘insensible parts’ with sensations. Hence, the perceptual experience occurs. Insensible parts are those qualities we cannot sense at the moment, such as the back and bottom of the tomato and so forth. If we lack the rational perception, those sensations we receive cannot produce perceptual experience. These sensations certainly cannot count as perceptual experience (we do not even know there is a tomato in front of us). According to Michaelian, rational perception seems to have the function of memory, inference (Michaelian 2009, 48-50). In this sense, rational perception can be viewed as a constitutive role in the case of simple perception (tomato) and more complicated perceptions such as facial recognition, other’s mind and so on. However, we should focus on the simple case since the complicated perception certainly goes beyond our discussion: in this case of tomato, rational perception seems to combine the sensations as well as bring the sense-data (the sensible and insensible parts of a tomato, the latter can be presented to us partly because we have memory) to us. Therefore, we can have perceptual experience.

2) The phenomenon of perceptual constancy is another example which shows that rational perception plays constitutive role in perception. A plate rotates in front of me, I perceive it as round. Nonetheless, from most angles, it really looks elliptical. How do we explain this phenomenon in the shoes of Cavendish? The process of producing perceptual experience can be constructed as below: sensitive matter patterns out the separated qualities of the plate (shape, color and movement and so on), rational matter patterns out the motion of sensitive matter. Rational perception not only combines the sensations together but also shows the ‘true’ shape (we know the true shape of this plate, even though the plate seems to be elliptical from such perspective, we can still grasp its roundness) of the plate to us to form our perceptual experience.



In the discussion above we can claim that rational perception functions as integration and constitution of perceptual experience.

## **Indirect realism and its consequence**

Why do we have to discuss the metaphysical stance of Cavendish's theory of perception? In doing so, does it really help us to better understand her theory or perception itself? This line of discussion can clarify her ontological position on theory of perception. We can ask further question by holding her stance: if there is no reality, what exists is an evil scientist always cheating us, and continually giving us stimulus in order to make us to believe that there is a reality. The consequence is that our perceiving object and claim we make have no reference at all. The more radical view will claim that there is no matter at all. However, this radical view will certainly fail since we can still claim that the 'copy' patterned out by sensitive and rational matter is still matter. For Cavendish, everything is matter. Additionally, this inquiry can reveal how other philosophers build their theory of perception from different metaphysical standpoint. For Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, consciousness interweaves reality. It follows that the activity of perceiving always refers to 'real object in reality'. The stances depicted here shows that we can have different perspective to understand the relation between perception and reality. Even though we will not come to a definite answer to the real interaction between perception and reality since all these discussions are metaphysical and are impossible to have justification from empirical studies, we will certainly know which side Cavendish plays for.

Secondly, from the standpoint of Indirect Realism it is hard to draw a clear line between self-knowledge and perception. It will cause the problem that self-knowledge and perception are both 'interior knowledge', in this sense, the difference between self-knowledge and perception become obscure since they are both 'inward' activity. Consider this statement: self-knowledge is the activity in which a part of me patterning out the copy of my own body and my mind, thus self-knowledge is no different from perception. In this section we

will see that this problem does not appear if we treat the perception as a causal process which self-knowledge does not have.

Finally, for Cavendish, everything is matter. It is a monism comparing with the tradition of Descartes. However, why she separated the animate matter into sensitive and rational? Moreover, why suppose that there exists inanimate matter? In a nutshell, is it necessary to make the theory so complicated? In my interpretation, Cavendish intended to separate the sensation and perception by setting out the sensitive and rational matter. Besides, inanimate matter exists because it plays the role of ‘obstacle’ to slow down the animate matter so that we often make mistake in perceiving. Human is not perfect in the activity of perceiving, we often make mistake. The fact that we make mistake in perception is exactly the reason that Cavendish employs the inanimate matter. Inanimate matter slow down the animate matter, thus mistake occurs.

What Indirect Realism really means? Our perceptual activity (towards outward reality) can only access mental representation instead of reality, this activity is prisoned in our mind rather than touching the real world. In this sense, reality is still out there but we can never access it. Mental representation, metaphorically, is like a picture patterned out by sensitive and rational matter. We perceive this picture, not the reality.

Another approach of treating ontological stance of perception is phenomenology, which was developed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Their stance is that our consciousness interweaves reality. This stance shows that the object in real world can certainly manifest itself in our perceptual field, and therefore what we perceived and claimed have reference to ‘something real’ in the world. This stance will not totally eliminate the existence of evil scientist, but we are likely to be able to touch reality when siding with this approach.

Cavendish’s stance surely belongs to Indirect Realism since at best what we can access is patterned out by sensitive and rational matter. Some may argue: if there is an evil scientist, we will no longer call Indirect ‘Realism’

because there is no reality but stimulus given by him. If this is the case, not only sensitive and rational perception is not responding to the reality, there could be no matter at all (if there is no matter, let alone sensitive and rational perception). This radical questioning which stems from Cavendish's theory of perception will probably destroy her theory since what exists in this world are just the mind and that evil scientist. Nevertheless, we can defend the Cavendish's realism by introducing her claim that everything is matter. The copy patterned out by sensitive and rational matter is still 'some kind' of matter. In claiming this, the mental representation is still matter. Cavendish's realism can be saved by claiming all beings are matters. The reason I introduced the term indirect realism is this: if what we can actually perceive is our mental representation, then we will never touch the reality.

Following the line of Indirect Realism, another problem will be raised: our perceptual activity only touch the mental representation, thus perception is an interior knowledge which is the same as self-knowledge. According to Cavendish, self-knowledge is 'interior knowledge' and perception is 'exterior knowledge' (Cavendish 2001, 138). This will cause another problem for her: self-motion and self-knowledge are the foundations of perception. If self-knowledge and perception are both towards inward, there will be no difference between self-knowledge and perception. The ultimate consequence is that she can reduce the self-knowledge and perception to same activity, it follows that the order of her natural philosophy (self-knowledge are more basic than perception) will be destroyed.

We could resolve this problem by claiming that perception requires causal process (here we do not consider the possibility of evil scientist) and self-knowledge does not. We can identify this point through the following paragraph:

In other cases, animate matter is occasioned by an external object to configure itself in ways that copy, or 'pattern', the motions of that object. This patterning (in humans, anyway) constitutes perception (Boyle 2015, 439).

If a thing appears in our perceptual field, sensitive and rational matter

will be ‘triggered’ to pattern out. In this sense, our perception is causal. We can see this point in the article published by Boyle: and that perception ‘properly so called’ is involuntary, in the sense that perception is occasioned by the presence of some external object rather than being voluntarily initiated by the thinker (Boyle 2015, 442). On the other hand, throughout her text, it seems that every part knows itself without any causal process. In other words, they can ‘directly’ grasp the content of themselves. Hence, setting out the causal process to demarcate the self-knowledge and perception seems to be the best strategy to protect Cavendish’s terminology and natural philosophy. Boyle holds the similar view: if perception is any sort of knowledge, it is knowledge of external objects and not self-knowledge (Boyle 2015, 440). For self-knowledge is more basic than perception in Cavendish’s philosophy, we can see this point by viewing the following claim: besides, perception being but an effect, and not a cause (Cavendish 2001, 142). If they are no difference, we cannot claim that perception is the effect of self-knowledge and self-motion.

The difference between sensation and perception is that the former only catch a part of an object, and the latter can grasp the whole object. Seemingly, Cavendish knew this difference. In order for her to demarcate sensation and perception in human cognition, she set out the sensitive and rational matter. Sensitive matter governs sensation, and rational matter governs perception.

Why suppose the existence of inanimate matter? In my interpretation, there are two reasons: 1) There are so many parts in nature which are inanimate for human recognition. For example, stone, dead body and so forth. Without the inanimate matter which resides in these objects, we can hardly understand why these objects cannot move themselves. 2) Human perception is not flawless, mistake arises from time to time. In order to account for this phenomenon, inanimate matter plays as a role of obstacle to slow down the capability of human perception.

## **Self-knowledge of our body the foundation: we just perceive a bigger 'me'**

In this section, I try to connect the self-knowledge of our body and perception. In doing so, we can better understand the relation between the self-knowledge of our body and perceptual field (the world we perceive). Even though Cavendish might not agree with my argument, I still believe that this relation (through knowing our body, we can thus perceive the world in this way) resides within her theory. In other words, extending her theory can let us to reach certain point where she never finds. More importantly, we will stress the significance of self-knowledge of our body for it is the basis of our perceptual field. Put it another way, this knowledge of our body is the foundation through which sensitive and rational matter can extract the content from it to pattern out the perceptual field we perceive.

We know our body arrangement and movement. For example, when you close your eyes, you still know where your limb is, the shape of your body and so on. This is not Cavendish's view, but we can observe these points through introspection. When you want to catch a bus, you just run towards it without deliberately thinking of how to move your foot or how to move your arms. In these examples, we know our body as a field. Having this self-knowledge, body seems like a field of which we can manipulate its parts, and we certainly know we have to pay attention to a specific part when we undertake a mission (imagine a pitcher in Major League Baseball).

Now let's turn our attention to our perceptual field. You perceive the world as it contains the space and figures in it. By looking around, you can indicate that the house is near to you, and the windmill is on the left of the house. The point is that this arrangement in your perceptual field is just like you feel your body (my left hand is on the left of my body, my right foot is on the right side of my body and this is farer than my right hand).

Cavendish would not deny self-knowledge contains these bodily contents. We can make a further assumption: our perceptual field is the reflection of our implicit self-knowledge of our body because there exists the

exact similarity between our perceptual field and our self-knowledge of our body. Besides, our perceptual field has the characteristics of spatiality and attention-oriented (I am looking at this house). These characteristics stem from our implicit self-knowledge of our body.

In my interpretation, self-knowledge of our body is the foundation of our perception. Sensitive and rational matter can extract those contents and therefore patterns out the perceptual field. In this sense, Cavendish is absolutely reasonable in the structure of our perception: self-motion (pattern out) and self-knowledge (of my body) as the basis of my perception (perceptual field). In this section, we can come to the conclusion that what we perceive outwardly is another me.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, the phenomena of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy could be seen as a filter which can test the coherence for a theory of perception. Cavendish's theory can easily pass through this filter. Moreover, we can better understand Cavendish's theory of perception. However, we should notice that her rational perception can have two functions which she did not clarify in her text: integrative and constitutive. Secondly, the theory of perception she develops will force her to accept that we might be prisoned in our own mental representation. Besides, the evil scientist will not threaten her materialism since she claimed that everything is matter. Another issue is demarcation problem. However, this problem could be avoided. Last but not least, our self-knowledge of our body is the foundation of our perception. Even though this section is relatively descriptive, I sincerely hope that this will be an insightful view to extend her theory of perception.

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