

Future Directions in Feminist Phenomenology
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Is Direct Perception Arrogant Perception?: Towards a Critical, Feminist Intercorporeity

ABSTRACT

Against Theory-Theory and Simulation-Theory approaches to social cognition, Shaun Gallagher has advanced a phenomenologically and hermeneutically sophisticated alternative he calls “Direct Perception.” Gallagher argues that we require neither inferential nor analogical access to others’ mindedness, since that mindedness is available to us directly in their expressive, interactive, and intentional involvement in a shared situation. Starting with expression and intentional interactions that unfold in the spaces between us, Direct Perception promises greater descriptive adequacy and substantial leverage into the problem of other minds than its competitors can offer.

Direct perception has many features that are appealing from a feminist perspective: it treats persons as fundamentally social, contextual, interactive, and embodied, while giving reasonable and appropriate attention to developmental psychology. In doing so, it helps to circumvent risks of solipsism and projection that dog many familiar approaches to others. However, it is less clear whether, as a theory, Direct Perception can offer ways to avoid the structural encoding of power dynamics that Marilyn Fry diagnosed as “arrogant perception.” Indeed, there is a serious danger that Direct Perception, like many of its hermeneutically oriented precursors, might be complicit in such power structures by squeezing out the space for critical social inquiry that the gap between self and other ought to foster.

Frye defined arrogant perception as a tendency of those in power to arrogate others to serve their interests, not only in practice, but at the very level of perception. The wrong perpetrated on arrogated others operates “invisibly” precisely to the extent that these interests structure what can become visible at all, while the structuring power itself remains invisible, operating “behind the scenes.” Frye’s own prescription of “loving perception” is inadequate to address this wrong for reasons that Direct Perception can help to articulate. Loving perception makes demands on the individual intentional attitudes of the participating subjects, but the true level of damage belongs to a space between such subjects, one that structures their expressive and intentional possibilities, rather than vice

versa. Lugones notion of world-travelling does a better job addressing the depth of the problem, since it acknowledges the power of the structuring in-betweens and calls for their plurification. Still, her plea for “playfulness” remains vague. In the final section of this paper, I argue that Direct Perception can learn from Lugones’s move away from the hermeneutic framework of rule-governed play and toward an ethos of playfulness. Meanwhile, Direct Perception’s attention to interactive expressivism, with its debt to Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeity, can help to fill in what this playfulness might look like. What I call “critical intercorporeity” allows us to explore how expressivity not only undergirds intelligibility, but might disrupt it as well, plausibly and playfully taking aim at the arrogating, embedded structures that govern visibility.