

The Standard Theory of Conscious Perception

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OBJECTIVES

- Motivate the existence of **subject-level integration**
- Demonstrate that attention is necessary for subject-level integration
- Present a theory that adopts this requirement, **the Standard Theory (ST)**
- Discuss a test case for ST: gist perception

INTRODUCTION

The Standard Theory gives an account of two phenomenological intuitions:

‘My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word. (James 1890, 403)

Attention first of all presupposes a transformation of the mental field, a new way for consciousness to be present to its objects....The first operation of attention is, then, to create for itself a field, either perceptual or mental, which can be ‘surveyed’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 33-4)

The Standard Theory shows how top-down attention transforms sensory input into conscious percepts by prioritizing the former with respect to a ‘subject-level standard’—a standard rooted in the subject. According to the Standard Theory, this transformation brings about both the **informational content** of perception, as flagged by James, and the determination of a **shared perceptual space**, as flagged by Merleau-Ponty. Thus, the Standard Theory is an account of how the subject brings about the structure of conscious perception through the activity of top-down attention.

WORKING DEFINITIONS

top-down attention (TDA): the prioritization of select mental or neural processing according to the subject’s current interests.

conscious perception (CP): the experience of informational sensory content, normally within a space-time framework.

information-for-a-subject (IfS): a state that can be contrasted with other states on the grounds of subject interest (i.e. subject-level standards).

subject-level integration (SLI): a property held by a set of informational states we call “the subject,” but not its subsets.

MAIN CLAIM

The prioritization of sensory input by **top-down attention** is necessary for **conscious perception**.

THE ARGUMENT

- 1 Conscious perception is **information-for-a-subject (IfS)**
- 2 To be **IfS**, early sensory processing needs **subject-level integration (SLI)**
- 3 Early sensory processing lacks **SLI**
- 4 For conscious perception, some process must bring about **SLI** for early sensory processing
- 5 To bring about **SLI**, early sensory processing would have to be differentiated according to **subject-level standards (SLS)**
- 6 Only top-down attention differentiates sensory processing according to **SLS**
- 7 Thus, top-down attention is necessary for conscious perception

THE STANDARD THEORY

Top-down attention provides for conscious perception by transforming sensory input into conscious percepts. It achieves this by prioritizing (and thus differentiating) the sensory input according to a subject-level standard, through which the sensory-input-turned-percepts are integrated at the level of the subject. This transformation results in a perceptual field organized according to interest, with high-interest stimuli appearing more meaningful and accessible to the subject. Conscious perception normally has layers of differentiation and integration beyond a single subject-level standard and it is the integration of multiple standards that requires a common spatiotemporal framework.

CONCLUSION

While the integration of features into objects does not require top-down attention, **the integration that occurs across features, objects, and individual experiences can only be achieved with the real-time application of subject-level standards through top-down attention**. Thus, top-down attention is necessary for conscious perception as we know it.

RELATED WORKS

- (in press) Action without Attention, *Analysis*
- (2015) **Attention and Perceptual Organization**, *Philosophical Studies*
- (2015) Consciousness without Attention, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*
- (2012) The Subject of Attention, *Synthese*

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- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge (Trans. C. Smith).
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A TEST CASE: GIST PERCEPTION



Figure 1: Gist perception with top-down attention

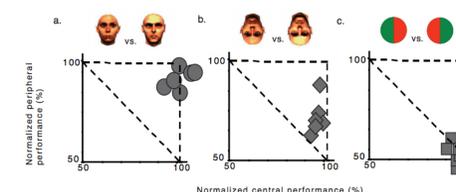


Figure 2: Gist perception without top-down attention

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