

Perceptual Presence and Constancy in Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual constancies and object constancies differ greatly from the orthodox views of the time that they opposed. Even today, his philosophy offers greater insight into these crucial features of perception than psychology of perception and physiology textbooks, and importantly the account he provides is one of the real lived experience of these phenomena. It is no wonder then that his phenomenology has had such far-reaching influence in more recent radical approaches to the scientific tradition, e.g., embodied cognitive science, enactivism, ecological psychology. In this essay I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual presence and constancies is far superior to the opponent empiricist and intellectualist accounts, as well as the account offered by Husserl. Crucial to my argument will be the emphasis he places on being-in-the-world, indeterminacy, motor-intentionality, grip and style, as these are decisive features of his phenomenological description.

There are two huge questions in the philosophy of perception that any philosopher must address: perceptual constancies and perceptual presence. Perceptual constancy refers to the tendency of the qualities of an object to persist through variations in our perception of them (Rookes & Wilson, 2000, p. 42-43; *cf.* Madary, 2012, pp. 145-146.). A frequently given example is that we do not see a coin as elliptical well balanced on its side, it remains circular/coin-shaped. This seems trivial at first, but the problem has the potential to derail many theories of perception before they even begin, especially for sense-data theorist and intellectualists for whom the start of all (visual) perception is the 2D image projecting onto the back of the retina, thus some mediating mental process must be invoked. This problem arises for the object's properties, such as size constancy, brightness constancy, shape constancy etc., and for the object in its entirety. The related problem of perceptual presence begs the question of how it is possible for hidden features of an object to be perceived as present, despite their absence from our current perspective (*cf.* Matherne, 2017, p. 693). I.e., how is it that in seeing only the front side of a lamp, my perception is of a lamp which has a back side which would be occurrent from a different perspective? Merleau-Ponty continually highlights this strange yet commonplace feature of everyday perception - in perceiving a book you do not see only its front face,

you perceive it as a substantive whole with many sides and depth, and many pages should you open it. He claims that hidden aspects and perspective are key to perception “To see is to enter a universe of beings which display themselves, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 79) as this provides the figure-ground relationship of perception which is fundamental in his phenomenology. To show how well-equipped Merleau-Ponty is to answer these problems, it will first be prudent to note how his position differs from those he explicitly challenges.

in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty immediately rejects intellectualism and empiricism, the first regarding perception as being a function of judgements, and the latter as perception being built upon sensations, “An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable... quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object.” (Ibid., p.4-5). He thus does away with sense-datum theories and begins to offer his own non-representational account of perception. His first line of attack is launched against the constancy hypothesis, which is the notion that perception is mediated by some mental image which bears an isomorphic relationship with the external object it represents, it is “...in principle a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception.” (Ibid., p.8). Merleau-Ponty inherits this argument from Gestalt psychology, as we never see fragmentary individual sensations, rather complex and inter-related wholes in figure/ground relations (Carman, 2009, pp. 631-633). Similarly, Husserl rejects intellectualism and empiricism, denying that judgements and mental images play a role in perception, and crucially that “the objects of which we are ‘conscious’... are first constituted as being what they are for us, and as what they count as for us...” (Husserl, 2001, p. 275; cf. Hopp, 2008, pp. 232-233).

The argument from perspectival variation is also of interest here, initially posed by Hume as an attempt to illustrate how we cannot be in direct contact with the mind-independent world. Hume presents the example of a table, and how it seemingly grows smaller the further away he moves (not unlike the near-cow and far-cow joke from Father Ted). As the table itself could not undergo any actual diminution, Hume concluded that it was only a mental image of the table that he was aware of, and not the table directly (cf. Hume & Gilroy, 1758, Section XII.1; cf. Husserl, 1962, pp. 117-118).

Merleau-Ponty rejects this, however. He continually asserts the position that objects have veridical qualities which can be directly perceived. Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty affirms that objects of experience are co-created by the object and the experiencer and that objects have veridical qualities that one can perceive directly, but that the experience of the objects are bound by intentionality and the horizonal structure of the objects for the perceiver. The focus on intentionality and horizons that Merleau-Ponty adopts from Husserl proves fruitful in overcoming the problems of constancy and presence, however, first it is essential to my argument to further explicate the notion of being-in-the-world.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty rejects empiricism and intellectualism as they both confuse the real nature of perceptual experience. Empiricism erroneously attempts to provide an atomistic description of perception, but the proposed building blocks of sensations are merely convenient fictions for misguided representational theories that "...corresponds to nothing in our experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, pp. 3-4; cf. Ibid., pp.240-241). Similarly, intellectualism misses the mark by positing second-order processes like judgements, beliefs, and reason as the basis for the elementary and immediate pre-conceptual know-how that the body has of being-in-the-world (cf. Carman, 2009, p. 631; Hass, 2008, p 4). We must hold the notion of being-in-the-world in mind throughout this essay as this emphasis on our being as actively situated within the world is pivotal to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Perception is always embodied and engaged, and that we are always busy pursuing projects is a key insight that directed Merleau-Ponty's thinking and grounds the concepts that he employs in his explanation of constancy and presence. In his view, perception is intrinsically linked to the perceiver's knowledge of what is actualizable with the objects at hand and their own capacities. Romdenh-Romluc (2007) elaborates on this process: "Instead, [perception] involves exercising one's motor skills to summon appearances." (p. 80). The concepts of intentionality and horizons now come in to play here.

Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims that objects are perceived as already constituted and imbued with meaning. What the object is, its shape, its size, its colour, and the actions it affords are all immediately known through perception. This 'summoning' is also reflexive, however, as

objects lead the perceiver to see them in a particular way, and often allude to more than what at first meets the eye; we will return to this point later regarding indeterminacy and optimal viewing. For now, sticking with intentionality, Merleau-Ponty's alternative treatment of the phantom limb and anosognosic cases illustrate precisely how objects present themselves in perception already beckoning to our abilities (*cf.* Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 94). Intentions and horizons are intricately linked, Husserl noted that the inner horizon of an object can include empty or unfulfilled intentions, as when confronted by a single face of a cube, we are struck by the implicit reference to the other hidden faces, the unseen aspects. These intentions are empty from *this* perspective, but we know were we to move around the object they could be fulfilled in place of the occurrent fulfilled intention of the face now seen (Smith, 2008, p. 324). Intentions and horizons are thus pivotal to an understanding of perceptual presence, and unlike empiricist or intellectualist accounts, the phenomenological approach blurs the boundary between subject and object, for we are both summoned and summoner of appearances, made of the same flesh as the world (Carman, 2009, p. 631). This view, is very much in line with Gibson's concept of affordances, Heft (2007) in noting the influence of Merleau-Ponty on ecological psychology writes:

“an intentional act as a representation independent of situational factors is at best an abstraction. Instead, intention refers to possibilities that are only instantiated in a particular form in interaction with situational factors.” (Ibid. p. 11)

The above statement is further compounded by Merleau-Ponty's own insistence that we see an object as attractive or repulsive before we see it as black or blue (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 28). Similarly, Husserl's description of affection a peculiar pull that an object has on the perceiver (Madary, 2012, p. 159).

While Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have thus far been in agreement about perception, Merleau-Ponty makes a decisive shift regarding perceptual presence and constancy. Both acknowledge that the possibility to view an object optimally, i.e, from the best vantage point is a guiding force in how we perceive objects, and that perception is often indeterminate. With each perspective there is the infinite inner horizon of unfulfilled intentions of the hidden aspects of the

object. For Husserl, if part of a rug is covered by a chair, the partial intention at play would be that we expect the pattern of the rug to continue, not necessarily how we would imagine the hidden aspect to be, more so that we implicitly do, as “there is yet more of the same thing to experience” (Husserl, 1974, p. 206). This is part and parcel with the givenness of the object as Husserl describes it, and for him objects are constructed from these partial intentions being fulfilled in a continuous flow (Madary, 2012, pp. 148-149). Moreover, what intentions are perceived and expected to be perceived coincide with the outer horizon, this can be seen in Husserl’s classic example of misperceiving a wax figure as woman waving at him. Many of the intentions associated with seeing a woman were initially fulfilled, she looked to be postured realistically, she had a realistic expression, etc., however, when crucial intentions failed to be met, such as movement, and the figure became more in focus, the outer horizon rapidly shifted in an explosion of the noema, to be that of a wax figure (Hopp, 2008, p. 240). In this example we find many key themes which will recur in the account offered by Merleau-Ponty, but he takes issue with this process as it does not place enough emphasis on the pre-conceptual know-how of the body, what he terms motor-intentionality. Furthermore, he does not think a synthesis of horizons is the best means of explaining constancy alone as evident in the view from nowhere and view from everywhere arguments as this would implicate a more higher-order cognitive capacities (*cf.* Merleau-Ponty, pp. 77-83). Instead he aims to place the source of the constancy in the body’s instinctual know-how and the objects externally veridical existence. I.e., hidden aspects are included non-consciously, similarly property constancy is achieved because we are aware of the perturbations that physical, tangible, visible objects can possibly undergo as we have experienced them as perspectival beings.

“it is true to say that the thing is the outcome of a flow of subjective appearances. And yet I did not actually constitute it, in the sense that I did not actively and through a process of mental inspection posit the interrelations of the many aspects presented to the senses, and the relations of all of them to my different kinds of sensory apparatus. We have expressed this by saying that I perceive with my body.” (Ibid., p. 380).

Similarly, he continues:

“The body’s motion can play a part in the perception of the world only if it is itself an original intentionality, a manner of relating itself to the distinct object of knowledge. The world around us must be, not a system of objects which we synthesize, but a totality of things, open to us, towards which we project ourselves.” (Ibid., p. 450).

Contrasted with Husserl’s description below, it is thus evident where Merleau-Ponty’s own thinking diverges.

“Every determinate feature has its own system of perspective variations; and for each of these features, as for the thing as a whole, the following holds good... it remains one and the same for the *consciousness* that in grasping it *unites recollection* and *fresh perception synthetically together*.” (My italics; Husserl, 1962, p. 118).

Thus, Husserl hinges his account of perceptual constancy on a synthesis of memory of other perspectives and the occurrent perception. This account lacks the advantages of Merleau-Ponty’s, who ultimately asserts that perception is not an additive process reliant on memory as “...the appeal to memory presupposes what it is supposed to explain; the patterning of data...” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 23), rather we already find ourselves housed within a totality towards which we are directed, and crucially so, with our bodies (*cf.* Ibid., pp. 349-350).

Heinamaa (2002) lists the three core facets of Merleau-Ponty’s approach, which taken together are called the reduction of the realistic prejudice; first, we must avoid the assumption that perception is like the objects perceived; second, we must refrain from assuming that objects of perception are simply present and determinate; lastly, we must avoid the assumption that the body is a mediator of sensations (Ibid. p. 133). This reduction means that being-in-the-world can now have primacy as the driving motivator of perception, which is no longer the mere passive input of data, but a purposive, exploratory process. The body, now, becomes the champion of perception, not the intellect, and perceiving is shown to be implicitly tied to one’s motor skills (Romdenh-Romluc, 2007, p. 97; Heft, 2007, p. 15). There is no paucity of evidence to confirm Merleau-Ponty’s privileging of the body and motility’s implicit role in perception. Consider the Kitten Carousel experiment (Held &

Hein, 1963); in this study kittens were raised in total darkness, bar the episodes they spent inside a carousel placed in a normally lit room with striped walls. During the periods they spent on the carousel, pairs of kittens received either active or passive visual input. In the active condition, the kitten was harnessed and able to move around the carousel. In the passive condition, the kitten was placed in a sled connect to the active kitten's harness, such that their movement was dependent on the active kitten; they were a passenger. The kittens from each group were then placed on a visual cliff apparatus; a patterned apparatus which contains a shallow and deep side, the deep side containing an illusion of a sharp drop on one side using plexiglass, but both sides are equally stable support for walking. Kittens from the active condition refrained from walking on the visual cliff, presumably thinking they would fall if they did; whereas kittens from the passive condition did not perceive the visual cliff as a danger and as such did not avoid it. As such, this study is widely accepted as supporting the following conclusions:

“...it is not visual stimulation alone, but rather self-produced movement and the corresponding visual feedback that are necessary for the development of visually guided behaviors. Thus, learning and growth occur only with the active interaction of the agent with the environment” (Needham and Libertus, 2011, p.118).

More support is drawn in response to Molyneux's famous question; whether a man born blind, who can differentiate between a globe and sphere via touch would be able to do so visually if his sight was restored (Molyneux, 1688). It's generally agreed that while patients with restored sight can visually discriminate the objects, they are not able to match their visual knowledge to their tactile knowledge of the objects, at least for a short period after surgery, as they have not yet re-forged the link between perceptual channels by plasticity which were severed for so long (Held et al., 2011). This is important for perceptual constancy as it highlights the “... givenness of the world to a situated bodily perspective that is neither merely sensory nor intellectual. The unity of perceptual objects as such... is grounded in the unity of the human body” (Carman, 2009, p.633). Again, looking to the case of Schneider presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*, we find a case where the body has its own covert knowledge which is inaccessible to the Schneider himself (*cf.* Merleau-Ponty, 2005, pp. 118-

128). Where in grasping the body already comports to the object which it intends to grip, this notion of motor-intentionality is “more than physical yet irreducible to the intellectual” (Mooney, 2011, p. 367), and goes beyond a direct realist position in the world as it hinges on a kind of understanding which is not representational but also at times not even accessible, it is inherent in the perception-action process that the body moulds to the shape of its intended objects (*cf.* Kelly, 2002, p. 385). On my view, the body is the key component in understanding perceptual constancy, the pre-conceptual know-how of motor skills are exactly that which gears us toward the world, this I find, is a common thread in several varying accounts of how Merleau-Ponty tackles constancies. It will now be pertinent to compare these different interpretations, in doing so, I will highlight the insights of each reading, where I agree and disagree with the authors.

As we have briefly noted, indeterminacy is a core tenet of what it is to perceive for Merleau-Ponty. He embraces the indeterminate properties of objects as positive presences in perception and a core phenomenological fact of being-in-the-world. He abolishes the intellectualist and empiricist compulsion to correlate one’s sense-data/mental image with the object as best as possible; we are now the body, not the intellect, and the body has no need to attempt to mirror what lies already before it. Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the figure-ground relation as the foundation of all perception, things must be occluded by other things, “a thing amid a context” or they would not be seen to begin with (Hass, 2008, p. 29; *cf.* Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 79). This is made explicit in his refutation of the ‘sensation’, and the body is necessarily bound into this relationship as well:

“One’s own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space.” (Ibid., p.115).

A proper investigation into the figure-ground nature of perception reveals just how commonplace indeterminate properties are. In my visual field, when focusing on something, the area around it becomes blurred and non-specific (Kelly, 2004, p. 82), but this is wholly part of the process of our perceptual project of achieving a maximum grip, an optimal view of the object (Romdenh-Romluc, 2007, p. 82; Kelly, 2004, pp. 84-85). In agreement with Husserl, he claims that the optimal viewing

conditions are “obtained through a certain balance between the inner and outer horizon...”; and that the figure-ground relationship is once again key to achieving this optimum; “... a living body, seen at too close quarters, and divorced from any background against which it can stand out, is no longer a living body, but a mass of matter.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 352). Kelly (2004) and Romdenh-Romluc (2007) see this implicit tendency to orient oneself toward the optimal viewing condition, to achieve the best grip on an object, as the key feature of Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of property constancy. Kelly (2004), however, goes one step further and claims that this acts as a normative function, thus accounting for perceptual presence and object constancy as well, as these features of perceptual experience don’t merely comport to a determinate point-to-point correspondence of how the world is rather “they say something about how the world ought to be for me to see it better” (Ibid., p. 87).

I strongly agree that we often tend toward the best perspective of objects, but I do not think this should be emphasized as the main cornerstone of Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the presence and constancy problem. I think Kelly rightly pinpoints indeterminacy as a core feature of what it is to perceive, but after doing so he hinges his argument on the attempt to eliminate this key feature. Merleau-Ponty does affirm that features of objects are a kind of “tension which fluctuates round a norm” (2005, p. 352), but he goes on to say that:

“I know the relation of appearances... not in virtue of any law or in terms of any formula, but to the extent that I have a body, and that through that body I am at grips with the world.” (Ibid., p. 353).

This I take to mean that we just do happen to perform this function by virtue of our bodily know-how. It may be a normative process when we are goal-oriented or completing some project, but this leaves out the possibility of when we are not trying to view something optimally, a point raised by Madary (2012) in his defence of Husserl’s intentional approach to constancy (p. 160). Moreover, Kelly attempts to boast the advantage that his line of argument has over the Husserlian approach in stating that the real constant object lurks in the background of every perception indeterminately as a positive presence to which we align our current perception. But, I believe, this articulation of the normative

function runs the risk of falling back on the Husserlian tools that Merleau-Ponty explicitly sets out to reject. Namely, inciting attention (*cf.* Kelly, 2004, p. 89); the projection of memories, as we have seen invoking memory creates an explanatory regress (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 23) and the synthesis of horizons (*cf.* Ibid., p. 450).

How then, should we continually fact-check our current perception and perspective against the real, constant, yet mere indeterminate hinting of the actual object in the background? If we are to adjust our perception to this real object, which is now the background to the figure, then we now have a figure-background-ground relationship, and to notice the norm to which we are striving would likely mean attending to the real object (the background of the figure, not the background of everything else bar the figure) and so compromise the figure-ground relationship entirely. This seems to me a step back from the sort of realism which Merleau-Ponty heralds, and I think this view is at risk of making our being-in-the-world merely parasitic on mysterious things-in-themselves, and not the direct contact with the actual objects as they happen to be which Merleau-Ponty advocates. On this line of thought, it will be fruitful to refer to Merleau-Ponty's description of colour constancy, he states: "The real colour persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory presence." (Ibid., p. 356). So far, this is in line with Kelly's normative view, however, he goes on to say that lighting conditions taken out of context afford little information to experience, and that by acknowledging the contribution of the whole visual field we immediately grasp all empirical facts about constancies (Ibid., p. 359). He continues saying that; "Lighting and reflection, then, play their part only if they remain in the background as discreet intermediaries, and lead our gaze instead of arresting it.", thus I would not lend as much emphasis to the *real constant* of the object as Kelly has, rather by holding our being-in-the-world continually in mind, we see that qualities such as brightness, and shape and size are all dependent on their occurrent relations between the objects and the body, thus we find that we "have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively" (Ibid., p. 327). Thus, recognition of the tendency toward optimal viewing and the indeterminacy of perception as a positive force rightly play a role in constancy, But, being-in-the-world needs to be given an equal weighting as well,

in doing so the Husserlian intention/fulfillment structure advocated by Madary (2012, p. 160), can persist through Merleau-Ponty's account of constancy.

Matherne (2017) expresses another concern regarding Kelly's reading, as it centres on the view put forth when Merleau-Ponty is considering what a view from everywhere would be like. As such, the other objects in the room's perspective on the focal object are posited and used to align the perceiver's own perspectival view to one of maximum grip (Ibid., p. 698), but as we have seen the purpose of perception is not to achieve a singular omnipresent perspective of one object, for this would annihilate the very possibility of detecting the object as the figure-ground relationship would dissolve (*cf.* Ibid., p. 700; Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 79). However, Matherne suspects that this was merely a strawman argument which Merleau-Ponty elucidates for the purpose of refuting later. Furthermore, she also finds that the normativity thesis downplays the role of the world in perception, in line with my own criticism above. What then is the alternative? She presents her own articulation of Merleau-Ponty's answer to the constancy and presence problems which stems from the concept of style, as adumbrated in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I believe the thesis she explicates to be far more advantageous to Kelly's normativity thesis, as it preserves the beneficial intention/fulfillment structure Merleau-Ponty inherits from Husserl, and it affirms the normative dimension of perception and the positive function of indeterminacy found in Kelly (2004). Yet, it pays due attention to embodiment and being-in-the-world, which is lacking to some degree in Madary's (2012) and Kelly's (2004) response to perceptual constancy and perceptual presence.

Matherne's style thesis hinges on the ontological use of style that Merleau-Ponty coins. As such, we need not rely on any rule or synthesis to make our perception conform to the object's actual properties, nor are our perceptions guided by some concept or idea of what the object is, counter to intellectualism and bundle theory (Matherne, 2017, p. 709-710). The style thesis does not risk drifting afield from the realism intended by Merleau-Ponty as style is conceived as an existential unity, it is the object's very manner of being which constitutes the constancy of the object (*cf.* Merleau-Ponty, 2005, pp. 327-328). This notion of style is succinctly nestled in our being-in-the-world and motor-intentionality.

“The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life. Its counterpart within me is the given, general and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions in which we have discovered the definition of the body.” (Ibid., pp. 385).

Now, the style of the object leaves open a horizon for all other perspectives of the object, as we are aware of how the style would continue, not unlike Husserl’s rug pattern example earlier. This horizon, however, is fully indeterminate, thus counter to Kelly’s view from everywhere position. Style recognition, Matherne continues, is dependent on our bodily connection to the object itself, upon identifying the style we simultaneously distinguish what the object is, whilst also becoming aware of the indeterminate horizon the style alludes to. Thus, in recognizing a crystal cube by its style, I am immediately aware of its hidden aspects, and the infinite other perspectives that are possible to have from the cube’s style (*cf.* Matherne, 2017, p. 714).

Up to this point, I have maintained that Merleau-Ponty would not wish to explain constancy by means of a synthetical process, but thus far that has been directed against the cognitive synthesis of horizons described by Husserl which involves the conscious synthesis of recollected perspectives with the current perspective (Husserl, 1962, p. 118). Similarly, I raised the concern that Kelly’s normative thesis might warrant a synthesis of the current perspective and an ideal, perfect perspective.

Matherne’s style thesis does employ a synthesis, but crucially, this is a pre-conceptual bodily transition synthesis (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 384), and this does not lead to any determinate thing.

Rather the body’s apprehension of the object’s style allows for different perspectives to be synthesized in relation to our motor-intentionality (Matherne, 2017, p. 718), thus accounting for perceptual presence. An object is thus perceived as constant because its style persists through alterations in perspective and unifies these appearances which we synthesize related to our motor-intentions and their fulfilment. Its properties are perceived as constant because variations in lighting and colour do not perturb the body’s implicit style recognition, further the properties of an object are unified by the style, thus any instance of an object involves not just grasping a property but the entire

manner of the objects being as a whole. This follows seamlessly from Merleau-Ponty's Gestaltist leanings, as the sum is not merely reducible to its parts.

In conclusion, the problems of perceptual presence and constancy are best met from a position which emphasizes our being-in-the-world and our body's implicit knowledge of how to deal with objects; motor-intentionality. Unlike empiricists and intellectualists, we need not get bogged down attempting to explain how mental images can be modified to mirror the world more accurately, or how judgements are made which rectify the image that hits the back of the retina. Nor should we deny the positive role of indeterminacy, or that objects are already imbued with value and invite us to orient around them in such a way as to attain the optimal view/maximum grip. The body is already geared towards the world and the world is directly known by it. As can be seen in the case of Schneider it is not the intellect that governs perception, instead the *'theory of the body is already theory of perception'*. I believe that these core facets of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology culminate succinctly in Matherne's style thesis described above.

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