

Phenomenological Approaches
(for *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy of Perception*)
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1. Phenomenology (as a philosophical movement or tradition) originated in the late nineteenth century, partly in an effort to find philosophy's place in a culture increasingly dominated by experimental science and technology—and in dialogue (sometimes in tension) with an emerging academic psychology. Beginning with Franz Brentano, phenomenology seeks an elucidation of just what the phenomena *are* psychology purports to explain, via inquiry anchored in an understanding of mind available from the first-person point of view. From this perspective experience or consciousness is seen as fundamentally “intentional”: it *refers* to or is *directed* at objects. Just how to describe this “intentionality” and its forms becomes a basic theme. Beginning with Edmund Husserl, the intentionality of perception is investigated by asking: how can experience, itself in near constant flux, nonetheless be of stable objects, so that meaning and knowledge might be possible for us? The key to answering this question, he proposes, is to see perceptual consciousness as dynamic and prospective—a process wherein the needed constancies are achieved via the successful anticipation of further experience through movement and direction of attention. This conception of Husserl's—with its emphasis on the experience of one's own body—helped inspire Maurice Merleau-Ponty's important mid-twentieth century contribution to phenomenology. The following is a summary of approaches to perception (in Brentano, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty) that are central to the phenomenological tradition, closing with a brief reference to recent work that stems from or neighbors it.

2. Brentano's philosophy has such continuity with what his student Husserl called 'phenomenology' that the term is fitting for both, though Brentano himself rarely used it, and generally preferred to call his approach 'descriptive psychology.' But this label could be misleading. Psychological description in his sense does not (as one might think) consist in saying what happens at a particular time in an individual's mind. Rather Brentano purports to describe mental phenomena by identifying their fundamental *kinds*—to tell us what distinguishes them, and how they are necessarily related to one another. And he conducts “psychology” not by performing experiments, but largely through philosophical dialectic reliant on first-person reflection—necessary, he thought, for clarity about the domain of experimental research. In Brentano's view descriptive psychology or phenomenology is in this way foundational for explanatory or “genetic” psychology, and crucial to the development of logic, ethics and aesthetics. It must, he thought, draw on a first-person understanding of the phenomena to be taxonomized, because this gives us our basic grasp of what we are talking about when we talk about, e.g., 'perception,' 'judgment,' 'love,' and 'hate.' (Brentano 1972: 29, 128) He attempts to justify his account of mental kinds by illustrating

them in ways we are invited to confirm with reference to our own first-person experience, and by continually seeking out puzzles and objections, responding to these with detailed argument.

But what is the general notion of perception that Brentano proposes? He was convinced by modern philosophy and science that the real denizens of space and time do not, in fact, bear the qualities (such as color or smell) that sensibly appear to us. But his irrealism was shaped by Aristotle's doctrine that in perception the sense organ receives the "form" of a sensible thing (e.g., the form of a color) without its "matter." In adapting ancient and scholastic conceptions, Brentano was led to the single most important aspect of his approach to perception—a revival of the notion of intentionality or (as he would put it) "intentional inexistence." (1972: 88) For Brentano, red (for instance) is "in mind," as an accusative of "mental reference," even when no real thing, *mental or otherwise*, is in fact red. Thus he thinks, more generally, what is perceived is often *not* an individual private to someone's mind, like the "ideas" or "impressions" of classical empiricism. For perceiving can "refer to" an object in a manner that does not require that what is referred to be something "real"—i.e., a particular in space or time.

This notion gives rise to a number of logical and ontological quandries variously addressed by philosophers Brentano directly influenced. Brentano himself eventually abandoned the idea that mental reference should be understood in terms of a distinction between "modes of existence" ("real" and "intentional"). But his neo-Scholastic turn had this lasting modern legacy: he implanted firmly in phenomenology the notion that perceiving is to be understood as an intentional "directedness" or "reference" to what putatively exists beyond the mind, rather than as a direct awareness of what really exists inside it.

To understand Brentano's "intentionalist" view of perception, one needs a grip on his distinction between judgment and "presentation." Not only perception, but all mental phenomena, he held, are intentional in his sense, because they either consist in or include a presentation that refers to an object—an "appearance" of it in the broadest sense. (1972: 81, 198) This encompasses the appearing of something one sees, or visualizes in imagination, or even only entertains a thought about. Merely to have a presentation of an object involves no commitment to its existence. To make this commitment, to *judge* there is a blue sphere, say, one must, in addition, *affirm* or *accept* the object so apparent—a blue sphere. For Brentano all perception is a form of judgment, in which something *presented* is *affirmed*. When a blue sphere is visually apparent to you, and you accept what is apparent, you perceive a blue sphere. And for Brentano, this very perceiving also presents itself to you, and you accept (and thus perceive) *that* as well. Thus he maintains that in addition to "outer" perception of physical phenomena (like color and shape) there is "inner" perception of mental phenomena (such as the appearance of color and shape). Brentano holds that, as a matter of fact (though not of necessity) all of our outer perceptions implicitly

contain inner perceptions of themselves. And on his account, for a mental act to be internally perceived is just what it is for it to be *conscious*. (1972: 100-129, 275-7)

In response to the worry that he over-intellectualizes perception by making it a form of judgment, Brentano argues that the mere acceptance of an object presented is an effortless cognitively primitive feat; it does not require an act of “synthesis” whereby one subsumes an object, together with others, under a concept. (1972: 141-2) This holds for both inner and outer perception. The two, however, do differ in (methodologically) significant respects, according to Brentano. Whereas we can, through outer perception, make observations, we cannot, in inner perception, strictly speaking “observe” our own minds at all. This is because observing something involves devoting attention to it so as to discover how it already is, and any attempt to thus attend to one’s own mental phenomena will (Brentano claims) inevitably *alter* what one wants to reveal. Thus inner (unlike outer) perception cannot constitute the attentive observation of what is perceived. (1972: 29-30) Nonetheless, inner perception has the following advantage. In outer perception there generally is no real object that is just as it is presented, while in inner perception appearance and reality inevitably coincide. (1972: 3, 10, 19-20) So, our understanding of the terms by which we describe our minds (unlike our understanding of those by which we describe external things) is grounded in a kind of constant implicit self-perception wherein things invariably appear (and are accepted) exactly as they are in reality. However, this infallible inner perception does not guarantee the correctness of whatever sincere first-person judgments we happen to *express* about what kinds of minds we have. For these may not reflect actual inner perception. While inner perception guarantees descriptive psychology a real subject matter, it does not make it easy.

2. Brentano was certainly not the only major influence on Husserl’s first mature philosophical work, the *Logical Investigations*. But he was a singularly important one, insofar as the phenomenological approach heralded there, its aims, “intentionality” as philosophical theme, and its application to perception, all carry over ideas from Brentano—albeit substantially transformed through criticism. Although Husserl’s views on perception developed importantly after his *Investigations*, some grasp of this work is necessary to understand the basics of his approach.

For Husserl phenomenology remains “descriptive” in something like Brentano’s sense—it relies on critical first-person reflection for understanding the categories needed for studying the mind. But Husserl thought Brentano had not fully recognized that we must sharply distinguish this enterprise from empirical psychology by explicitly rejecting all “psychologism.” As Husserl understood it, psychologism in its most basic form holds that principles of logical inference ultimately concern (or are justified by reference to) inductively discoverable processes in actual psychological subjects. Such an attempt to subordinate logic to psychology he saw as an intellectual disaster, for it leads to a relativism about

truth that would undermine the rational presuppositions of all theoretical inquiry, and circularly assumes, in its search for the laws of mental processes, the very norms of reason it purports to legitimize. The defining task of “logic,” as Husserl broadly understood it, is to investigate the presuppositions of theoretical knowledge—including those relating to meaning and perception. (2001: *Prolegomena*, §§ 1-16) Thus “logic” in his sense extends well beyond the formal study of valid inference and includes (phenomenological) philosophy. To completely avoid psychologistic error, it must, Husserl thought, in all its subdivisions remain as steadfastly *a priori* as geometry, and hold its justification aloof from empirical claims. (2001: *Prolegomena*, 75-76, 149-150, 153-4, 165-6, 168-170)

Husserl thus approaches perception via an *a priori* investigation of the possibility of knowledge. Like Brentano, he makes clarifying the ways in which perception and other mental phenomena “refer to objects” central. Unlike his teacher, he bases his conception of the intentionality of perception on the idea that the objects of perceptual appearance are sensory constants presented through changes in experience. For Husserl perceptual experience is an extended temporal process with a special sort of unity constitutive of its intentionality—the understanding of which is essential to making sense of the possibility of knowledge. Husserl early on illustrates his conception of sensory constancy with reference to color, shape, and sound. (2001a: V, §§ 2, 14) The surface appears to you uniform, unchanging in color, even as you experience that appearance differently depending on changes in viewing conditions. The box appears to remain the same cubical shape as you experience this appearance differently with changes in perspective. Your experience as you hear the adagio of the violin or the twittering of birds can undergo change, though these sounds do not themselves thereby appear to change. This is the kind of constancy amid experiential flux that makes sensory appearance refer to an object—an object that goes beyond (“transcends”) what is strictly speaking a part of (something “immanent to”) the experience. It must be emphasized that, in making perceptual constancy crucial to sensory intentionality, Husserl remains within the sphere accessible to first-person reflection. He does not conceive of visual constancy as a uniformity of what is seen through change in correlative *retinal stimulation*. He is interested in object constancy amid *experiential flux*, our awareness of which does not depend on our knowing anything about (e.g.,) our retinas and their condition.

Before seeing how Husserl developed this account further, we must consider how to align it with his general view of intentionality, the goal of which is to elucidate the intentionality of *experience*—where an ‘experience’ is for him a component of someone’s “stream of consciousness,” which he takes to include episodes of conceptual thought and volition as well as sense experience and imagery. (2001a: V §1) He starts from paradigms of “intentional mental acts” Brentano would recognize, including perception, but also judgment, doubt, love, imagination, etc., and the Brentanian observation that in each case we may look

to the accusative of the corresponding verb to identify what the act is “directed toward”—its object of reference: in judgment something is judged (about), in loved something loved, in imagination something imagined, etc. (2001a: V §10) The fundamental points for Husserl then are these: first, we must distinguish between the object to *which* the act refers, and the object *as* it is referred to—i.e., the manner in which the act is directed towards it. (2001a: V §17) In Husserl’s example: the object to which two thoughts refer may be the same—the Kaiser—though the manner in which each refers to him may differ: *as* the son of Emperor Frederick III, *as* the grandson of Queen Victoria. There are two important general ways in which the manner of reference may be the same or differ, however—one (just illustrated) is a difference in the “matter” or “interpretive sense” of the act, a difference in “as what” the object is referred to. The other involves a sameness or difference in “act quality.” (2001a: V §§20-21) For example, one may either *judge* or *doubt* or *wonder whether* the Kaiser is the grandson of Queen Victoria. Here we see the matter/sense remains the same, though the *quality* differs. Likewise, quality may remain the same while matter varies. We see here too that the matter of an act can correspond to a whole proposition. (Husserl would say that the object to which the act refers is typically not a proposition, but the *state of affairs* that makes it true.) Finally, every intentional experience must have both quality and matter, and in virtue of this has intentionality or mental reference. However, it is not necessary that there exist an object to which such an act refers. It may be true that you are thinking of the god Jupiter, and what your experience refers to is Jupiter, but this does not entail that there is someone—the god Jupiter—of whom you are thinking. (2001a: V §11)

This basic picture gets elaborated and revised in elusive ways post-*Investigations*, when (in *Ideas I* (1982)) Husserl replaces his “matter/quality” terminology with talk of an act’s “noema” and its components. But leaving these complications aside, we can see how Husserl’s quality/matter schema raises questions about the relationship between thought and judgment on the one hand, and sense experience on the other. On his view, much as what is thought about is thought of *as* something, what is perceptually apparent also appears to one *as* something—the appearance involves an “interpretation”; it has an “interpretive sense.” But are we in either case to regard this as a “conceptualization” of the object? Is the content of perception also “conceptual”? And just as we say someone *judges* that the paper is white, and distinguish the matter/sense/content of this judgment from the state of affairs judged, may we also say someone *sees* that the paper is white, attributing to one’s visual experience *the very same content and object* as that of the judgment? Husserl’s Sixth Logical Investigation bears on such questions, but the discussion is tentative and its interpretation uncertain. For present purposes we may limit ourselves to the following.

Husserl discusses perception’s role in understanding the reference of demonstrative expressions such as ‘this’ and ‘that’ (and so its role in forming the thoughts they express)—and he holds that the way that we experience the object picked out by ‘this’ so as to understand the reference cannot be expressed in

terms of general concepts applied to the object; intentional experience here involves what he calls a “non-attributive” sense. (2001a: I §§24-7, VI §5) Further, there is indeed, for Husserl, an experience of *seeing that the paper is white*, as distinct both from one of *judging* that the paper is white, and of merely *seeing the white paper*. *Seeing that*—for Husserl a “categorical” perception—essentially involves (is “founded on”) the “straightforward” perception of an object, *seeing the white paper*. This latter, basic object identification is made possible, again, through the sort of constancy phenomenon discussed earlier, distinctive of sensory *appearance*. This sensory appearance constitutes one form of “intuition” of an object, where “intuitive” intentional experiences have the distinctive role of “fulfilling” other intentional experience, in the sense in which the visual appearance of white paper “fulfills” the judgment that there is some white paper by *confirming* or *warranting* it. Husserl recognizes that to get from merely *seeing the white paper* to *seeing that the paper is white* (so as to confirm the corresponding judgment) one cannot simply pile up object perceptions—as if (absurdly) the latter consisted in seeing three items corresponding to: ‘the paper,’ ‘is,’ and ‘white.’ Husserl proposes to understand the bridge between mere object perception and categorical perception via a kind of sensory attention in which an *individual aspect* of the object is “cast into relief”—you may, he says, be struck by the “peculiar coloring” or “noble form” of an object seen, in a way that does not necessarily involve applying a “general presentation” of the specific *type* of color or form involved. Now, however, not just seeing the white paper, but in this special way *attending* to the paper—*seeing the white in the paper*—makes it possible for us to acquire concepts from experience and—once those concepts are possessed—it enables one also to *see that* something is the case, i.e., to have a form of “categorical” perception. (2001a: II §21, VI §§40-3, 45-8)

Subsequent to the *Investigations* Husserl enriches his conception of the type of unity in experience over time that makes object perception possible, and allows us to confirm or disconfirm (“fulfill” or “frustrate”) prior experience through later experience. His idea that all perception involves an “indeterminate” “horizon” whereby future experience is “anticipated” is crucial here. (1982: §§24, 35, 41, 113, 2001b: §§1-3) Husserl’s notion of horizon includes a recognition that there is a “field” of visual experience with a “fringe,” “margin” or “periphery” where what appears, appears less *determinately* in its features—e.g., shape, size, location—than does what one is focusing on, what one is looking at. But the area of what is less determinately apparent is not confined to some region at the limits of what is experienced—a “fringe.” For example, as one looks at a series of words in a text as one is reading, say, the horizon of one’s experience would include the area immediately surrounding whatever bit of the text one is looking at, as well as the area within it—for the individual letters and their parts are not as determinately apparent as they would be if one focused on each letter individually, as typically one does not. Further, the visual horizon ordinarily includes not only the indeterminately but still visually apparent surfaces and areas before one, but also hidden sides and parts of what appears. For on Husserl’s view, part of what makes your perspectively varying, temporally extended visual experience refer

to an object at least partially constant in its spatial features is your successful on-going “anticipation” of the appearance of its as-yet-hidden, unapparent aspects. Specifically *what* shape, texture, etc. you visually anticipate on the far side of the object you are looking at is left fairly open—quite indeterminate relative to the appearance of the sides so far facing you. On the other hand, you do not merely anticipate “some surface contour or other.” Some future appearances would reveal the earlier experience to be illusory—by running contrary to what was anticipated—one would, we might say, “experience (visual) disillusionment.” This links to the idea that perceptual experience involves an “interpretive sense” (a part of what Husserl came to call the “noema”). The sense of your visual experience—what you experience the thing seen *as*—will “predelineate” the range of how it can appear from additional perspectives while these appearances still remain in “harmony” with those that have gone before.

In texts such as *Thing and Space* (1997) and *Ideas II* (1989) Husserl emphasizes the uniqueness of the experience of one’s own body and connects this to his notions of perceptual horizons and anticipation. He draws a distinction between the *Körper*—your body as an object among others, site of various physico-chemical processes—and the *Leib*—your body as you yourself experience it in normal active life. The latter sort of bodily self-experience is involved in the sort of the anticipation essential to sensory intentionality. For how one anticipates the hidden or less determinately apparent aspects of an object will appear is somehow contingent on one’s movement with respect to it—and one experiences the fulfillment (or frustration) of such anticipations through the experience of one’s own body and its movement.

For Husserl, part of what emerges from reflection on the characteristics of spatial experience sketched above is its essentially perspectival nature. He then uses this to justify his conception of proper phenomenological method, by taking it to show that no fulfillment of past spatial experience through satisfied anticipations of future experience is ever complete—ever, in his terms, “adequate.” Future experience can always offer past experience something more in the way of confirmation, and the prospect of disconfirmation of past appearances is never entirely ruled out. Husserl seems to infer from this that it is possible to philosophize about experience while suspending commitment to the existence of particular objects in the natural world—and by means of this “phenomenological reduction” achieve the sort of epistemic independence from assertions about them he thought his a priori investigation needed. (1982: §§42-50)

This understanding of the essence of spatial experience and its methodological significance joins with a view of self-awareness that reworks themes from Brentano’s account of inner perception. For multiple reasons Husserl rejects Brentano’s presentation/judgment analysis of perception generally, as well as the idea that our perceptual appearances themselves appear to us in a univocal sense of ‘appear’ and are continually objects of reflexive

judgment. (2001a: V Chapter 3) Thus he rejects Brentano's notions of inner perception and consciousness. However, he holds that while it is conceivable that there are no spatial objects one has actually experienced though one's consciousness remains, still one has a primitive kind of "non-objectivating" consciousness of one's own experience that is inconceivable without having actual experience that *is* just as one is *conscious* of it. And for Husserl this basic "self-giveness" of experience in which it—unlike its spatial objects—are "adequately" (i.e., incorrigibly) evident plays a role in grounding the conception of consciousness that his phenomenology aims to articulate, analogous to that played by Brentanian self-presentation. (1982: §§ 33, 34, 42, 46, 49, 138)

The views just sketched might seem to oppose what in contemporary terms would be styled an "externalist" doctrine about perceptual experience and its content. That is, it might seem that, for Husserl, no finite spatial experience, understood phenomenologically, ever guarantees that any actual spatial object has been perceived. Thus no "transcendent" concrete particular to which a given perceptual experience may refer and by which it is fulfilled could ever be an essential constituent of such experience itself, or of its sense or noema. However, this interpretation is contested. Some take Husserl to hold that objects in space are indeed part of the content of perceptual experience, and are not left behind by methodological reduction, but retained to be considered merely under a certain "reduced" aspect—namely, "as perceived."

4. Merleau-Ponty saw his main work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, as developing the insights of Husserl, and many of his central concepts are clearly Husserl-inspired. Merleau-Ponty's approach is avowedly "descriptive" in the sense that descends through Husserl from Brentano: phenomenology proposes to *describe* perception from "the point of view of consciousness," rather than try to *explain* it from "the point of view of science." (Merleau-Ponty 2003: ix-x) And for Merleau-Ponty, as for Husserl, this is an effort to characterize the nature of perception as it is experienced by a perceiver—partly as a corrective to traditional theories that allegedly neglect or distort this perspective. As with Husserl, this is motivated partly by a desire for a conception of the intentionality of sensory consciousness that will make intelligible the constancy-amid-flux it ordinarily exhibits. How is it possible for a perspectively limited, ever-fluctuating experience to make stable objects apparent to us, constant in, e.g., color, size and shape—how can vision, for example, "be brought into being from somewhere, without being enclosed in its perspective"—so that an objective conception of the world, such as both common sense and science take for granted, becomes possible? (2003: 75-83) Husserl-derived notions of "horizon," of the "indeterminacy" of experience, and of "anticipation" all contribute to Merleau-Ponty's answer.

However, in certain respects Merleau-Ponty seems to depart significantly from Husserl's approach. Merleau-Ponty's text (unlike Husserl's) is replete with references to experimental and clinical studies—particularly ones having to do

with psychological deficits and pathologies—and these feature prominently in his argument. He does not see himself as bound by a strict a priorist methodology, and regards the distinction between the a priori and a posteriori as in some sense a relative matter. He holds that Husserl's reduction "cannot be completed," and purports to motivate a phenomenological attitude towards perception, in which we attend to perception *as we experience it*, not by means of some global suspension of commitment to the reality of perceived things, but by recognition of the divergence between the character of objective sensory stimuli, proximal and distal, and the world as it perceptually appears to us—a divergence he thinks psychology helps make clear. (2003: xii-xvi, 8-10, 53-8, 62, 68-9)

This perspective informs Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* from its opening pages, in which he attacks the idea of the "sensation as a unit of experience"—i.e., of primitive non-intentional elements in experience, subject to processes of association or interpretation through judgment. Here he draws on the early Gestalt psychologists (who themselves had been influenced by Brentano's school and by Husserl), and on the phenomenologist Aron Gurwitsch, whose lectures introduced Merleau-Ponty to Gestalt Psychology. Merleau-Ponty maintains that even simple perceptual experiences involve a distinction between "figure" and "ground" that goes beyond putative "meaningless" sensory elements, and argues that there is no compelling reason to posit sensations in experience as subjective correlates of the perceived objects' qualities (e.g., colors), or of proximal stimuli (e.g., retinal "images")—as did those psychologists who held the "constancy hypothesis" criticized by the Gestaltists.

In objecting to sensations in this sense, Merleau-Ponty in effect rejects Husserl's idea of a primitive uninterpreted, non-intentional sensory "stuff" of experience ("sensory" or "hyletic" data). But he motivates this opposition, in part, by appeal to the Husserlian idea that experience is pervaded by a kind of indeterminacy incompatible with supposing its character is constituted out of a set of definite sensory qualities. (2003: 6-7, 12-13) For instance, two lines, both apparent, may appear to you neither equal nor unequal in length; a person's eyes may commonly look somehow colored to you, even when there is no specific color they then appear to you; a many sided crystal may well appear to you regular in its shape—although there is no specific number of sides it appears to you to have. Merleau-Ponty regards this indeterminacy of appearance as a "positive phenomenon." By this he seems to mean that appearances that are similarly indeterminate with respect to specifically *what* is apparent (in, e.g., the way of shape, size, color) may nevertheless really differ in character. This idea figures importantly in his view of attention. He objects to the assumption that the direction of attention in perception involves merely bringing to consciousness what was already determinately in the mind—as one might shine a light on what was already there in the attic. What this misses, he thinks, is the aspect of attention exhibited constantly by the movement of our gaze, through which we learn about what is before us by enriching our experience of it: what is at first only dimly prefigured in experience moves from indeterminacy to determinacy, so

as to emerge more clearly for us, while what was more determinately apparent dissolves into the background. (2003: 35-6) This “positive indeterminacy” of experience, though ubiquitously evident in shifts of sensory attention, is nonetheless prone to neglect, since perception promotes its own oblivion by plunging our thought into the things we perceive, which makes us liable to project the determinacy of these things onto their manner of appearance.

All this prepares us to understand better the notion of a visual (or more broadly a phenomenal) “field.” For we now see that there can be for us an indefinitely bounded region of space variously apparent in ways that cannot be cashed out in terms of a definite set of objects identified and attributed a set of properties. This connects with Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the Husserlian notion of “horizon,” and shapes his interpretation of the guiding question he gets from Husserl, heir to Kant’s legacy, of how consciousness of objects is possible for us. While Merleau-Ponty, steeped in the Kantianism of his French teachers, certainly recognizes this heritage, he is determined to avoid what he sees as the “intellectualist” pitfalls of their approach. This requires getting a proper phenomenological understanding of our actual experience, such as emerges from the critique of “traditional prejudices,” and using this to frame the challenge. When we do so, and take proper account of the positive indeterminacy of experience, we see that perspective should not be construed—in, e.g., the visual case—merely in terms of what parts of the surfaces of objects are exposed to view, given one’s location. For it is far from true that even everything to be found in the facing surfaces is apparent to one. Much that is right before one’s eyes is (in an indeterminate way) “hidden.” And *this* kind of “hidden-ness” (not just the way things are hidden by being *occluded*) also contributes to the perspectival limitation in which perception escapes being “enclosed.” (2003: 78-82)

Just when Merleau-Ponty has set up the problem of how this escape is possible—to put it somewhat paradoxically, how there can be more to what one experiences than one experiences—his thought takes a curious turn. He does not address this central question directly. Rather he proposes we first concentrate at length on what is special about the perception of one’s own body—conjecturing that this will furnish the key to understanding our experience of everything else. (2003: 83)

What is special about the way I experience my body? Partly it is this: I experience a body as my own insofar as it is the body I experience whose movements seem to determine my indefinitely varying perspective on all *other* things, while affording me a uniquely limited capacity to vary my perspective on *it*. (2003: 103-111) But this still leaves open questions about just how I experience this body’s movement. We might suppose that, even allowing for the special character just mentioned, my mind otherwise represents my own movements much as it represents the position and movements of other objects. The main difference is just that, in the case of my body, the position and movements represented figure in the execution of my intentions uniquely and

fundamentally: my body's movements are *those my mind chooses as basic means to the ends it sets*. This is precisely the picture Merleau-Ponty defines his view against. On his account, my ordinary experienced bodily movement in the service of everyday tasks is not in this way merely the *effect* of some such separate internal planning, nor is it just this plus a *cause* of inputs to mental processes. Rather, my experienced movement is *itself* non-derivatively a way of *understanding* things; it is a way of being *conscious* of them, a form of *intentionality*, no less than the thoughts in which I may engage when reasoning—though this “motor intentionality,” as he calls it, is distinct in kind from the operations of the intellect. So, it's not that I am only “directed at” things through representations in my mind, which on their basis formulate commands to a certain body to attain goals it also represents. Rather, I am directed at things through the experienced (“lived”) movements themselves—looking at things, and touching them; it is literally true then that *my body* thereby *understands* things perceived. In this sense *I am one with my body*: in experiencing my own bodily movement as I am engaged in looking at, touching, reaching, grasping, etc., I am conscious of myself “*qua* subject”—i.e., as one who actively understands. (2003: 277)

His case for this position is elliptical, indirect, and still far from adequately analyzed. But it seems to turn on the following considerations. First, there is an appeal to our ordinary experience of movements in executing tasks. From a phenomenological point of view, when I reach to touch my knee, I don't need to *think of* how to move, and I am aware, in the way I am feeling myself reach, of my success (or failure) in executing my intention. And when the phone rings, I experience my effortless adjustment of posture, and reach for the phone in a way appropriate to my situation with no awareness of a selection of these movements from others possible as means to an end. Nevertheless, I am able to smoothly adapt my movements to varying circumstances to secure the same end—all such movements equally experienced as (e.g.,) “reaching for the phone”—as varying manifestations of a unified skill or bodily “habit.” Generally, I may say I experience an indefinite range of my own movements as in this and similar ways *functionally equivalent*. Thus I have a “body schema”: a systematic but open-ended capacity for engaging in experienced, functionally equivalent patterns of movement as my task and situation require. (2003: 112-5, 163, 172-3)

But one might still think such movements are generally to be regarded as responses to *commands* issuing from the *choices* of some inner planning faculty—even if we do not *experience* them as such. Merleau-Ponty argues this would be a mistake. For there are several phenomena he thinks this would leave us no satisfactory way of understanding. For example, he asks, how can creatures as primitive as insects adapt their behavior to serve their ends *without deliberation* (as when a beetle substitutes the action of another limb for that of one that has been severed)? Why do our *habits sometimes persist* when our avowed beliefs should make the futility of our alleged “choice” of movement obvious (as when an amputee tries to stand on his phantom leg)? Why do severe

deficits in subjects' ability to perform bodily "movements to order" nevertheless leave largely *intact* their capacity to exhibit similar motor activity as the everyday projects demand it? (2003: 90-5, 118-26)

Suppose we agree with Merleau-Ponty that to respond properly to such questions we must give up thinking of skilled movement as always the product of the mind's commands. How should we think of it instead? He proposes an alternative rooted in the phenomenological claim that the practical demands of your tasks are part of what you ordinarily perceive in your situation, as what you are trying to do makes certain things perceptually salient for you. For instance, as you are about to use the scissors, you see where they are *to be grasped*, and then you see where the material is *to be cut*. Generally, much as you are conscious of what is required for the completion of a pattern—such as a melody you begin to hear—you see *what is to be done* with what lies before you, given your goals, and you are (without deliberation, conscious or unconscious) *motivated* by such experience to do what is called for (to complete this "melody"). Moreover, given your projects, you see *opportunities* for action—e.g., something appears to you as *reachable*, a space appears as a *way through*. (Here Merleau-Ponty's account joins with later Gibsonian talk of perceived "affordances.") (2003: 120-2, 127-9) And, as you acquire more skills, your capacity to spontaneously recognize and respond to the potential offered in your situation becomes less constrained by circumstances. You acquire a *liberty* lacking altogether in non-human animals locked into more stereotyped responses to their environment, a sort of spontaneity degraded in human subjects whose brain damage sharply diminishes what opportunities they can perceive. By contrast with these, our normal, culturally shaped but loosely constrained perception of the practical significance of what we encounter partly constitutes what it is for us not just *to have an environment*, but, as Merleau-Ponty puts it (borrowing from Heidegger) *to be in the world*. (2003: 100-1, 149-61)

On this basis Merleau-Ponty argues it makes sense to regard movement itself as a form of understanding. For we see that movement is highly *flexible or adaptive* in pursuit of one's goals, and experienced in a way *sensitive to norms* (of success or failure). And though it reflects and is guided by one's plans and intentions, it does not simply *derive* its teleologically adaptive, norm-sensitive status from a causal relation to separate norm-governed goal-oriented mental activity, such as might be found in some planning subsystem. This together suffices for movement to constitute "understanding" in a non-trivial sense. (2003: 164-70) We will resist this, if we cling to a theoretical tradition for which what is understood always includes some general idea or concept that one can understand and employ in thought even when not applying it to perceived instances. But we should recognize that what is "understood" through sensorimotor activity is not a concept or rule whose formulation we might apprehend independently of its concrete application, but belongs rather to the category of "*style*." In this sense 'style' is involved in understanding a work of art. We recognize that *what is expressed* in an artwork strongly resists paraphrase or

translation into other media or languages, since it is so closely bound up with a specific sensible *manner of expression*. Accordingly, one cannot grasp the specific style belonging to the work without perceiving this manner of expression in a concrete instance. Similarly, we can understand the “style” of our movements through which things are perceptually accessible to us, and the “style” of appearance they present to us, only in performing such movements ourselves and encountering what appears; no formulation comprehensible in abstraction from such sensorimotor engagement will provide the same understanding. In this sense, the experienced unity of one’s own body in action is like the unity perceived in a work of art. (2003: 174-7)

In Part Two of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty proposes to put this conception to work illuminating a range of basic perceptual phenomena: sensory integration; perceived orientation, depth and motion; and perceptual constancies. We can see how sensory integration is achieved within a modality—as when we resolve our double vision to see a single thing—if we think of this as the exercise of a motor understanding of how to focus and coordinate our eyes. (2003: 284-9) And synaesthesia and what are now called “cross modal” phenomena are most intelligible if we understand the boundaries of the sensory modalities in terms of the motor skills they involve, for this can account for how the senses interpenetrate and mutually condition one another in experience as they do. (2003: 263-8, 271-83) Perception of orientated space—specifically, of “up and down”—also becomes, Merleau-Ponty maintains, more intelligible from the perspective of sensorimotor understanding. For example, subjects who wear lenses that invert the usual pattern of retinal stimulation report (after initial confusion), that things “appear upside down”—but then gradually, as they adapt through bodily interaction with their surroundings, they say that things begin to appear to them oriented more or less as before. (2003: 284-9) It is legitimate to accept (as we should) the accuracy of their reports, provided that the perception of up/down orientation is constitutively dependent on the perceiver’s motor skills for dealing with what is thus oriented. Finally, consider the phenomenology of perceptual constancy. The perspectival experience of a size or shape, for instance, is not an experience of a determinate measureable size or shape, and the object does not appear to shrink as I move away, or to morph as I tour it. Thus, while I am given perspectival variation in the experience, I am not given data from which the true objective constant size or shape of a thing could be inferred—as per “intellectualist” accounts of perception. Nonetheless, my perspectivally variant experience of size and shape *somehow* bears on my experience of an invariant size and shape. We can understand this, according to Merleau-Ponty, if we say that it is essential to experiencing a given constant size or shape to exercise and be set to exercise a capacity for movements (in looking at, in touching) that appropriately vary systematically with these perspectival changes in experience so as to generate appearances of constancy. Size and shape constancy is not an inference from data, but an achievement of motor understanding. (2003: 348-54)

We can now see how all this yields Merleau-Ponty's answer to the question of how experience can escape being "enclosed in its perspective," and his take on Husserl's notion of the sort of "anticipation" of experience whose fulfillment makes sensory intentionality (and thus an objective conception and knowledge of the world) possible. One experiences a stable thing by anticipating the style of its future appearances in the style of one's movements. This movement (of, e.g., looking and touching) is not merely derivatively prospective—it is not *guided by a prediction*, as by a separable representation of "what will happen if...". Rather the movement itself *constitutes* the anticipation of what will appear, as when one shapes one's grip in reaching for something "in anticipation." And by *successfully* anticipating experience so as to sustain the appearance of a complex style of constancy (in shape, color, position, etc.), experience is confirmed as the *perception* of things in the world, rather than illusion or hallucination. (2003: 346, 376, 389-95)

Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl that no such fulfillment is ever complete; no experience affords us absolute certainty there is an object of which it is a correct experience, and precludes all possibility of any future reason to doubt this. However (and here perhaps he parts with Husserl) this does not mean that we can remain generally certain of the character of our own experience, while judgments about "the external world" are either doubted or suspended *en masse*. For in recognizing the possibility of visual error in a particular case, phenomenologically I am left with a merely disjunctive characterization of my experience: either this is a case of genuine ("factive") seeing (there is actually (e.g.) an ashtray that I see)—and consequently my experience is not ontologically independent of the thing seen—or else this is a case where my experience is merely *as if* I am seeing a thing (I "seem to see it"). But I wouldn't understand the second disjunct at all, if I did not think such experience similar to *some* case in which the first sort of disjunct obtains, where I took myself to genuinely see something, and the experience is object-involving. This, Merleau-Ponty thinks, shows that I cannot rationally, even in philosophical reflection, globally withdraw commitment to the reality of things perceived, and retreat to some certainty regarding my experience: to question whether there really is something I see is equally to put into question what sort of experience I am having, and the reality of a world transcending my experience of it is not something I can ultimately intelligibly doubt. (2003: 343-7, 400-2, 435-7)

5. It remains to indicate briefly a few ways in which the phenomenological tradition discussed above continues to renew itself and to inspire discussions of perception. Recent detailed overviews of Brentano's and Husserl's views of perception sensitive to contemporary concerns are found in Mulligan (2004, 1995). Hopp (2011) interprets and develops Husserl's *Investigations*-era views on perception to engage with current debates on the intentionality—particularly those stemming from the "conceptualist" view of John McDowell and opposed accounts of "non-conceptual content." Yoshimi (2011) develops a framework for showing how "the dynamics of neural activity, as described using a connectionist

formalism, relate to the dynamics of consciousness, as described by Husserl.” A.D. Smith (2002, 2008) defends a theory of perception influenced by Husserl as well as an externalist reading of his position. Opposing treatments of the question regarding Husserl’s internalism or externalism are found in the recent general accounts of Husserl offered in D.W. Smith (2009) and Zahavi (2003).

Controversies over the alleged “intellectualism” of McDowell’s understanding of perception and action, raised by Hubert Dreyfus from his Husserl-averse, and Heidegger- and Merleau-Ponty-inspired viewpoint, are variously discussed in a collection of papers (Scheer 2012) in which interpretation and extension of the phenomenological tradition often figures importantly. Dreyfus (2004) explains how he takes his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty to bear on contemporary cognitive science. Carman (2008), Kelly (2004), and Wrathall (2004) propose and defend interpretations of Merleau-Ponty influenced by Dreyfus’ perspective. Romdehn-Romluc (2007) and Siewert (2005, 2012), partly responding to Dreyfus, offer their take on crucial aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s account. Gallagher (2005) works out his own conception of “body schema.” Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s work also provides an important background to recent interest in “embodied cognition.” Thompson (2007) proposes one such ambitious, explicitly phenomenological “embodied” view of perception, building on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and developed in the context of the philosophy of biology and dynamic systems approaches in neuroscience. Noë’s (2004) sensorimotor view of perception, and discussion of the “problem of presence,” though less directly engaged with Merleau-Ponty’s account, significantly resembles it in certain respects, and raises similar issues in its kindred challenges to orthodoxy.

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