More Than Meets the Eye:
Object Perception and Perceptual Presence

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May 2017

Introduction

In the Introduction to Part One of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes some surprising claims about the perception of objects. He asserts that, "I already perceive the central object of my present vision from different angles," that "each object just is all that the others 'see' of it," and that, "The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden." (71) At first, these claims seem contrary to ordinary experience. Visual experience seems necessarily perspectival, and we don't intuitively think that objects can "see," less that they are "translucent." In what follows, I consider the plausibility of Merleau-Ponty's claims by exploring the phenomenon of perceptual *presence*—how it is that we experience unattended features of a scene. Specifically, I argue that ordinary visual experiences of objects necessarily exceed their appearances, or perspectivally visible aspects. In particular, I will argue, through Merleau-Ponty, that "hidden" aspects of objects have *positive* perceptual presence in experience, and that knowledge, thought, belief, expectation, or memory are not necessarily constitutive of object perception. Lastly, I'll consider how Merleau-Ponty's positive account of perceptual presence may figure into the notion of objective thought.

Objects and Hypothesis

It's tempting to say that we only see the front faces of objects, or only those parts of them that bounce photons toward the eye. However, no visual experience is *only* of the front facing aspects of objects. Beyond front faces, we also experience "hidden" aspects of objects, for instance, backs, sides, obscured areas, relative position, and general character. When I see a red car from the back, I perceive it as a complete, three-dimensional object, not a mere façade. Although we don't see hidden aspects, we nevertheless experience them. Visual experiences of objects thus *exceed* our situated visual perspective on them. The same argument applies retinal images: The images captured on the retina are upside down prior to neural processing (it is commonly described that the visual cortex "flips" the image hitting the retina) relative to ordinary visual experience, and so visual experiences necessarily exceed, or even bypass, them. Although the *information* contained in visual experience of objects and retinal images is shared, we perceive whole objects despite seeing only some aspects of that object. Perception thus has the ability to present aspects beyond front faces and images of the world captured by the retina. Further, perception has the plasticity to normalize inverted stimuli so that subjects can safely navigate "inverted" environments with ease, illustrating a necessary structural orientation of embodied visual perception. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 212) Visual experience precisely isn't like looking at a sculpture that presents its subject from only one perspective. Rather, objects are perceived as three-dimensional and actually having their hidden aspects. That is, perception *grasps* the general character of objects from single perspectival viewings.

Visual experiences reveal objects with *perceptual presence,* that is, experience of at least some "unattended features of a scene." (Noë 2004, 60) Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) claimed that the way that we are perceptually acquainted to unattended features is by cooperation with thought, memory, or expectation. In my view, Merleau-Ponty's claims in *Phenomenology of Perception* about seeing objects

from different angles, objects "seeing" other objects, and "translucency" (p. 71) reveal his definitively non-Husserlian position on perceptual presence. Sean Kelly (2005) argues that Merleau-Ponty's claim about objects seeing other objects is critical to his understanding that visual experiences of objects necessarily *transcend* (go beyond) their appearances, and further, is central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of what it is to see objects as three-dimensional entities, despite only seeing them from a perspective. (p. 76-77) Kelly relates the phenomenology here with the experiences of seeing the same object as two-dimensional façade and a three-dimensional entity, as when experiencing a convincing Western movie set before and after knowing it to be a movie set. (77-78) With Kelly, I take the experiences before and after knowing movie sets are façades as phenomenologically different: before knowing that the movie set is a façade, the buildings appear *authentic*, as if you could, for instance, enter the saloon and order a drink. Yet, after experiencing the false interiors of the façades, the set's buildings lose their authenticity. Before knowing the movie set as a façade, the experience of its objects went beyond their appearance, in this case suggesting functional interiors. After knowing the set as a façade, the experience of its objects instead suggests hollow interiors, again transcending the perspectival view.

Kelly traces this account of *object transcendence* in experience to Husserl, who argues that reconciling the coexistence of two-dimensional retinal images with the three-dimensional experiences of the objects they depict is a central problem for philosophies of perception. (78) As Kelly relates him, Husserl states that in order to properly characterize the phenomenological distinction between experiencing objects as two- and three-dimensional, we must admit that perceptual experience is (a) not limited to the fronts of objects (i.e. their appearance), and (b) give an account of how hidden, indeterminate aspects such as obscured backs or sides are present in perception. To solve this problem, Husserl distinguishes between *determinate* and *indeterminate* features of objects in perception. Crucially, Husserl takes these latter, hidden aspects of objects as

"hypothesized but sensibly absent," and attributes the experience of indeterminate aspects of objects to a knowing, belief, or expectation that these indeterminate aspects *can* become determinate through bodily movement, as in moving through a concert crowd to get a better view of the performance. (78-79) So, on the Husserlian account, ordinary experiences of three-dimensional objects are reconciled with their front-facing appearances through the awareness of knowledge, belief, or expectation about how the perspectival view *could* change based on bodily movements that provide a new perspectival view on the object.

Further, Husserl claims that the "raw data of sensation" (*hylé* in his terminology) are interpreted and then fit into conceptual frames, which, in turn, constitute visual experiences. (Cf. Kant's epistemology) In contrast to front-facing determinate *hylé* that contribute to the retinal image, Husserl calls the hypothesized but sensibly absent aspects of objects as indeterminate because they are "co-apprehended" in experience *in conjunction with* thought, memory, belief, expectation, knowledge, expectation or some other *hypothesis*. (Kelly 2003, 122-126) Therefore, on Husserl's account of visual experience, the indeterminate aspects of objects are present in experience insofar as a perceiver knows, believes, thinks, or otherwise *hypothesizes* that they could be revealed in a possible experience.

Gazing at the Horizon

By contrast, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) departs from Husserl's "hypothesized sensible absence" as an account of perceptual presence, opting instead for a positive account of the phenomenon. (Kelly 2005, 79) Following his critique of the concept of sensation, sense-data theories, and "classical prejudices" in the outset of *Phenomenology of Perception (*2012, 3-12), Merleau-Ponty makes his peculiar claims about experiencing objects:

> I already perceive the central object of my present vision from different angles…each object just is all that the others 'see' of it…The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden. (71)

This account of object perception expressly denies the necessary involvement of thought, knowledge, belief, memory, expectation, and *hypothesis* generally, and so is non-Husserlian. Classifying perception as primarily object-oriented, Merleau-Ponty plainly states "Our perception ends in objects, and the object, once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences we have or that we could have." (69) Alluding to Leibniz, he describes the *geometrical plan* of an object as a "view from nowhere…a non-perspectival term from which all perspectives can be derived," which Leibniz used to distinguish between God's always transcending perspective and our necessarily situated point of view (69, fn. 2). However, Merleau-Ponty seems to think that ordinary visual experience *already* goes beyond its objects, despite our necessarily perspectival frame of visual reference.

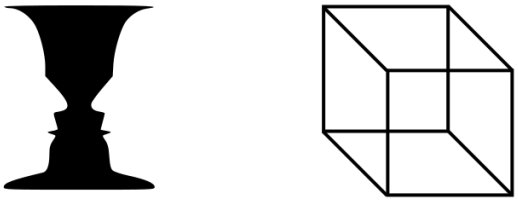
For Merleau-Ponty then, the claim "I see X" does *not* mean that the eyes (retina, lens, photoreceptors, etc.) *cause* visual experiences, nor that retinal image of X constitutes or is sufficient for an ordinary visual experience of X. For him, the assertion rather expresses "a certain manner of reaching the object" that he terms the *gaze,* which is "indubitable as my own thought, and which I know just as directly." (69) The gaze thus constitutes the perspectival character of all object perception, and is a necessary condition for the possibility of perceptual presence for Merleau-Ponty, as he holds that vision "comes about from somewhere *without* thereby being locked within its perspective" (ibid, italics added)

In my view, the gaze enables the experience of hidden aspects of objects, and is therefore constitutive of perceptual presence as Merleau-Ponty understands it. Merleau-Ponty offers a

phenomenology of seeing objects that we can use to exemplify how different aspects of objects may be "sensibly absent" yet perceptually present. He states,

> To see an object is to have it in the margins of the visual field, and be able to focus on it or actually to respond to this solicitation by focusing on it… With a single movement, I close off the landscape and open up the object. (70)

The *gaze* therefore constitutes the figure/ground organization of visual experience in the sense that it "shifts" or "opens up" the figure and ground as such. We experience this in a controlled way when looking at bi-stable or ambiguous images such as the Rubin's figure-ground vase and the widely-known Necker cube:



In the former, the gaze modulates the view of the illusion as a vase or two faces, and it shifts the Gestalt in the latter. Further, the "two operations" of perception accomplished by gazing—the closing the landscape and opening the object—blur or suspend the background to make focusing possible. This evident from experience: When I see a particular object and focus on it, the surrounding scene falls back, while the object becomes distinguished. Phenomenologically, it is as if perception "highlights" the object in focus, and "dims" the background scene, thus constituting the experience of an object in the visual field.

Merleau-Ponty seems to take the gazing operations as innate and independent of knowledge (and specifically scientific knowledge), offering that:

> "Even if I knew nothing of cones and rods I would still understand that it is necessary to suspend the surroundings in order to see the object better, and to lose in the background what is gained in the figure, because to see the object is to plunge into it and because objects form a system in which one object cannot appear without concealing others." (70)

Here, he explicitly states that no sort of detailed knowledge is needed on the part of the perceiver to constitute objects as they appear in perception, and I think this can be extended to other types of knowledge, memory, expectation, or other *hypotheses*. Our perceptual activity is intuitive—objects appear as constituted "by default," and we do not need to necessarily invoke synthetic hypotheses to have visual experiences of objects' salient or hidden aspects. Rather, objects simply appear as having those aspects in experience. I think this is the phenomenology Merleau-Ponty conveys in asserting that objects are already perceived from different angles—I can see that objects have *more to them* despite not actually seeing what the "more" is, and there is good phenomenological evidence for this claim.

Consider the experience of seeing the Statue of Liberty from lower Manhattan. From this perspective, you can generally see the classic depiction of the statue—Lady Liberty faces you, book in hand, eyes forward and tilted slightly upward, torch raised in the air. Contrast this with the view from parts of New Jersey where only the statue's back, depicting Lady Liberty's hair and flowing garments, is visible. Neurophysiologically, there is a retinal image of the statue's front in the view from Manhattan and it's back in the view from New Jersey, yet in both cases and others from different vantage points, the "hidden" sides of the statue are nevertheless perceptually present as

being there, giving the statue its character as a three-dimensional object in the visual field. Any normal perceiver sees *that* a three-dimensional object stands in New York Harbor when looking at the Statue of Liberty despite only seeing it from a particular perspective—the fact that some of its sides are "invisible" from certain vantage points does not impair the veridical perception of the statue in the environment or construe it as some sort of two-dimensional projection, hologram, or otherwise deceptive representation. This ability of perception to present features absent in the retinal image as *being there* in perception constitutes our understanding that objects in general have indeterminate hidden features, and thus are a necessary condition for the possibility of having knowledge about particular objects. This, in my view, supports Merleau-Ponty's assertion that objects are "perceived from different angles" in visual experience. The "different angles" describe experiences of *that* hidden aspects of objects exist despite their absence from the retinal image.

The passage quoted above also suggests that the *arrangement* of objects in the environment or in a scene plays a constitutive role in how hidden aspects are experienced, and this grounds Merleau-Ponty's peculiar assertion that objects see other objects. He states:

> "When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities that are visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can "see." The back of my lamp is merely the face that it "shows" to the fireplace." (71)

This claim is peculiar yet plausible. Hidden aspects of objects (backs, sides, etc.) are experienced as being there and objects appear as having more to them despite the lack of grounds for such appearances in the retinal image. The coffee cup on my table appears as it does because I am experiencing the presence of its front *and* hidden aspects, else I wouldn't perceive it as having those aspects in the first place.

Let's add more detail to the scene: I'm sitting at a table, writing an open laptop. There is white coffee cup off to my right, a lamp at the center of the table, a bookshelf against the wall to my left, a fireplace on the wall to my right, and doorway beyond the table on the wall in front of me. When focusing on my coffee cup, it appears as three-dimensional as a result of my suspending of the background and focusing on the figure with my gaze and its *arrangement* relative to other objects in the scene. The scene would have a markedly different character if the fireplace, bookshelf, lamp, book, or any other objects were removed. We experience the importance of arrangement in object perception when, for example, a scene or space we see regularly "feels different" after something is removed—a painting is changed, a piece of furniture removed, a wall painted, etc. We may not immediately locate the specific difference perceived, but we nevertheless experience the scene as different phenomenologically. Similarly, in music, different compositions may contain the note A, however the character of the A note can be changed dramatically by the surrounding musical context (e.g., chords or counterpoint), or the A note can be changed to alter the overall character of the piece (e.g., by modulation or substitution). So, when Merleau-Ponty asserts that objects see other objects, I interpret this as a description of how particular objects and their arrangement relative to each other constitute the general character of scene. He isn't saying that objects *actually* perceive other objects, but rather that the gaze, in taking in the arrangement of objects in a scene, constitutes ordinary visual experiences of objects in the world. Thus, the objects of a scene, the perceiver's gaze and the arrangement of those objects constitute the ordinary experience of objects as "full" or "having more to them," not some extra-perceptual knowing, memory, expectation, or other hypothesis.

If the operations of the gaze and arrangement of the objects in a scene constitute how objects "show up" in visual experience, then Merleau-Ponty's departure from Husserl is rooted in his holding that hidden aspects have a positive perceptual presence. That is, in that hidden aspects are

actually present in experience, and not merely *possibly* there as allusions to possible experiences. This implies that, for Merleau-Ponty there is no necessary interface between perception and thought, memory, belief, or other hypothesis involved in object perception. Perception simply *does all the work*.

Merleau-Ponty also offers that objects are identified by applying the gaze to a fragment of the landscape such that it becomes "animated and displayed," while other objects recede into the margins and "become dormant," but do not cease to be there. (70) This phenomenological description of animating and receding maps onto the figure/ground distinction, and introduces what Merleau-Ponty calls *horizons* as necessary for the perception of objects. By his description, *horizons* are peripheral to the object in focus *and* imply it as the figure, thereby assuring the object's identity. (Ibid.) This point is enforced through phenomenological description of a "close-up" camera angle:

> "I do not identify the detailed object that I now have with the one I glanced over a moment ago through an explicit comparison of these details with a memory of the initial overview. Compare this to a film when the camera focuses on an object and moves in to give us a close-up of it. In this case we can surely remember that we are seeing an ashtray or a character's hand, but we do not actually identify it as such." (70)

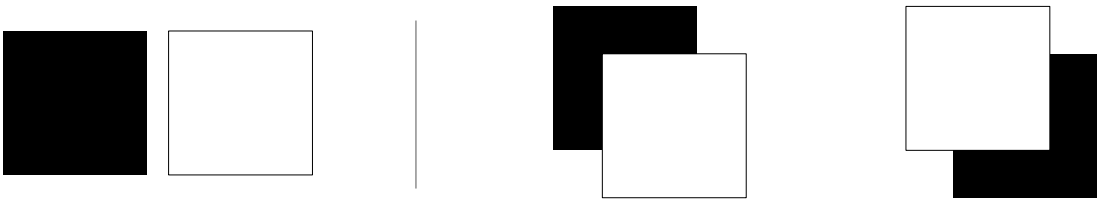
In this example, Merleau-Ponty attributes the lack of ability to identify an object to the lack of *horizons*—that is, aspects of the figure presented by the background and arrangement of a scene. Further, Merleau-Ponty asserts that *hypothesis* does not necessarily imply objects in perception, stating, "no express memory and no explicit conjecture could play this role—they could only provide a probable synthesis, whereas my perception is given as actual." (Ibid.) For Merleau-Ponty then, the Husserlian emphasis on possibility as object-defining is abandoned for asserting the *actual*

presence of hidden aspects in experience. That is, horizonal details originating in perception itself—not *hypotheses*—are constitutive of object perception for Merleau-Ponty.

Translucency in Perception

In my view, we can thus understand Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual presence in visual experience as follows: In *gazing*, perceivers focus on an object as part of an *arrangement* and experience its *horizons*, thus grasping the attended and unattended features of a scene. Merleau-Ponty asserts the perception of different angles, and ascribes seeing to objects not in the literal sense, but rather in the sense that the arrangement and horizons of objects imply the salient and hidden aspects of the figure. This conclusion can, in my view, be demonstrated as phenomenologically constitutive of depth perception with a simple experiment that also resolves what Merleau-Ponty means by describing the objects of perception as "translucent" in experience.

In the figures below, observe how the first arrangement of squares appear on the same z (depth) plane, and different z-planes in the second and third arrangements:



The second and third arrangements present the objects such that the bottom squares have hidden aspects covered by the top square that are excluded from the retinal image, yet present in the perception of the object system. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, the bottom square "sees" the foreground

square, and we take up this horizon in perceiving the foreground square as "on top." Interestingly, this difference also leads to the first arrangement appearing two-dimensional and the latter two as three-dimensional (i.e. having z-plane extension). Again, using Merleau-Ponty's terms, the foreground squares in the latter two arrangements appear 'translucent' insofar as I see the scene as of overlapping squares, even though this goes beyond what hits my retina. The full bottom squares are *present* in my visual experience of the object systems, yet absent or "invisible" in terms of the eye. Although I do not strictly speaking *see* the bottom squares, they are nevertheless present to me, and not *through* connection to any thought, memory, knowledge, belief, or other hypothesis about the nature of squares or squareness in general. Again, *perception does all the work*. This, in my view, can be understood cogently through the figure/ground operations of the gaze and the constitutive influence of arrangement and horizons as described in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Perceptual Casting and 'Objective Thought'

The above moves to render Merleau-Ponty's positive account of perceptual presence plausible. What then remains of the Husserlian view of presence and object transcendence? Certainly, there are instances in ordinary experience where perception is informed and shaped by interfaces with thought, knowledge, belief, expectation, memory and other hypotheses, and these syntheses are regularly consulted for various reasons. For instance, when asked a question about my past, one may assert that I interface with my memory of that past. In playing improvisational music, one could argue that I rely on expectations of certain structures when to execute melodic or rhythmic ideas. In cases like these, I think that Merleau-Ponty would claim that I am not interfacing with hypotheses, but rather that my past experiences and present associations are already "baked in" to perception. In my view, Merleau-Ponty could claim that the hypothesizing argued to be

constitutive of hidden aspects in experience by Husserl *exceed* perception in the same way that visual experiences of object exceed objects. That is, such operations could be understood as not constitutive of visual experiences, but rather as *conscious applications* of hypotheses outside perception to experience.

What then are we doing when we consult a memory, expectation, thought, knowledge or other hypothesis in experience? In my view, this characterizes *objective thought*. When we think "objectively" we are definitively not examining experience from the position of phenomenological reduction or *epoché*. Rather, that which we "bracket" in phenomenological analysis is precisely what we purposely employ in casting our points of view—scientific observations, experimental results, memories of past happenings, knowledge of facts, beliefs about the world, expectations, memories —and the list goes on. Objective thought is then the antithesis of phenomenological reduction—it removes us from the frame of naivety about experience and brings more information into play. We think and speak *objectively* when considering cause and effect, incorporating various facts and expectations into the perceptual frame to assess a situation, create a judgment, or otherwise produce some *synthetic* cognition in ordinary life. This is categorically distinct from doing phenomenology, which takes a naïve approach to experience specifically to expose the first person, subjective aspects of conscious experience. Would this be Merleau-Ponty's position as well? I'm not entirely sure. However, I do think he would agree that objective thought as construed above is antithetical to the phenomenological reduction as a result of its inherent hypothetical nature, and further, that objective thought exceeds phenomenological reduction in the same way that visual experience exceeds the retinal image. As argued above—and I do think Merleau-Ponty would agree—we experience "more than meets the eye," despite the magical tone of this claim.

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