

2 Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field

Merleau-Ponty's interconnected critiques of empiricism and intellectualism run like a double helix through the pages of *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹ In the decades since its publication in 1945, philosophical and psychological theories of perception have continued to take for granted empiricist and intellectualist models and metaphors, though their respective claims to preeminence have tended to swing to and fro in unpredictable ways. As a result, although the current state of play in the philosophy of mind for us today differs widely from what it was for Merleau-Ponty in the middle of the last century, neither would he find it altogether unrecognizable. His objection to the empiricist concept of sensation (or "sense data" or "qualia"), for example, is likely to strike contemporary readers as familiar and plausible, thanks in part to arguments advanced in a roughly kindred spirit by philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, Wilfrid Sellars, and Thomas Kuhn. To launch an attack on intellectualism as Merleau-Ponty does, by contrast, might look more like tilting at windmills, or beating a dead rationalist horse – or perhaps just failing, understandably enough, to anticipate the cognitive revolution in linguistics and psychology that took place after his death in 1961.

But while cognitive science has undeniably had a profound impact on contemporary thought, its enduring importance, like that of many research programs that have come and gone before it, may in the end prove largely negative. For cognitivist theories of perception and intentionality derive much of their apparent plausibility from little more than the implausibility of competing empiricist and behaviorist accounts, and are in this sense of a piece with more traditional forms of rationalism. As Merleau-Ponty says, "intellectualism thrives on the refutation of empiricism" (*PP* 40/32/37). Deprived of its dialectical foil, cognitivism has less speaking clearly in its favor, and its weaknesses are often

precisely those of the intellectualism Merleau-Ponty knew well and criticized in the 1940s. The critique of intellectualism advanced in *Phenomenology of Perception* thus remains highly relevant to contemporary theories of perception and cognition.

What follows in this essay is an account of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of empiricism and intellectualism, which is to say his rejection of the concept of sensations or qualia as primitive building blocks of perceptual experience on the one hand, and his equally emphatic denial that perception is constituted by or reducible to thought or judgment on the other. What emerges from that negative assessment of the two dialectical poles framing traditional debates about perception and the mind is a positive and original conception of perception as our most basic bodily mode of access to the world, prior to the kinds of reflection and abstraction that motivate the idea of discrete passive qualitative states of consciousness and spontaneous acts of cognition. What Merleau-Ponty calls the "phenomenal field" is neither a representation nor a locus of representations, but a dimension of our bodily embeddedness in a perceptually coherent environment, a primitive aspect of our openness onto the world.

I. SENSATION

Phenomenology of Perception commences with a critique of the concept of sensation. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, the word "sensation" is perfectly at home in ordinary language, and the notion at first "seems immediate and obvious." On closer inspection, however, it turns out that "nothing could in fact be more confused" (*PP* 9/3/3). Indeed, in theoretical contexts the concept systematically obscures our understanding of perceptual experience: "Once introduced, the notion of sensation distorts any analysis of perception" (*PP* 20/13/15). What is wrong with this ordinary notion once we enlist it in the service of a theory of perception?

The first point to observe is a purely phenomenological one, namely, that notwithstanding the ordinariness of the word "sensation," what we find in ordinary perceptual experience is *not* internal sensations, but external things: objects, people, places, events. The concept of sensation "corresponds to nothing in our experience" (*PP* 9/3/3-4). Nowhere in our perceptual awareness do we come across discrete qualitative bits of experience fully abstracted from the

external, perceptually coherent environment. Occasionally we might see an afterimage or hear a ringing in our ears, but typically we see objects and hear noises made by things and events. This is in part just to say that perceptual experience is *intentional*, that it is *of* something, whereas impressions, sensations, and sense data are supposed to be the nonintentional stuff from which the mind somehow extracts or constructs an experience of something. But the *of* in “sensation of pain” is not the *of* in “sensation of red,” for the latter is intentional while the former is not. In the latter case, that is, we can draw a distinction in principle between the red thing and our sensation of it, whereas a sensation of pain just *is* the pain. And even pains are not just feelings that we associate with parts of our bodies; rather, my pain *is* my leg, my hand, my head *hurting*. Perception is essentially interwoven with the world we perceive, and each feature of the perceptual field is interwoven with others:

Each part arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a *meaning*. ... The perceptual “something” is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a “field.” ... The pure impression is therefore not just undiscoverable, but imperceptible and thus inconceivable as a moment of perception. (*PP* 9–10/4/4)

The concept of sensation in philosophy and psychology thus finds virtually no support in our actual experience, however firmly planted the word may be in ordinary discourse. Merleau-Ponty also offers a phenomenological diagnosis of our tendency to recur to talk of sensations, as if they really did occur in the normal course of perception. When the concept arises, he suggests, “it is because instead of attending to the experience of perception, we overlook it in favor of the object perceived” (*PP* 10/4/4). We are naturally focused on or “at grips with” (*en prise sur*) the environment, so that when we turn our attention to perception itself, we tend to project onto it the qualities of the objects we perceive:

we transpose these objects into consciousness. We commit what psychologists call the “experience error,” which means that what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take to be in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. (*PP* 11/5/5)²

The language of sensation is thus tainted by, and so parasitic on, the language with which we refer to the objects of perception: “When I say that I have before me a red patch, the meaning of the word ‘patch’ is provided by previous experiences that have taught me the use of the word” (*PP* 21/14/17).

Putting the point this way, in terms of the specifically linguistic conditions of our ability to identify and describe many of the qualitative aspects of our experience, brings Merleau-Ponty into close company with Wittgenstein and Sellars. In *Zettel*, for example, Wittgenstein insists that the language of perceptual appearance, or mere seeming, is parasitic on a language descriptive of external things:

To begin by teaching someone “That looks red” makes no sense. For that is what he must say spontaneously once he has learned what “red” means. ... Why doesn’t one teach a child the language-game “It looks red to me” from the outset? Because it is not yet able to understand the more refined distinction between seeming and being?³

It is not as if children are just not observant or clever enough to notice that seeming is more basic than being; rather, the meaning of a term purporting to describe a mere appearance must already have acquired a normal use in describing the way things *are*. In much the same vein Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, “appearance is only possible *on the basis of* something showing itself,” which is to say *being* some way or other.⁴ Similarly, in his critique of what he calls the “Myth of the Given,” Sellars distinguishes between merely *sensing* sense contents and *knowing* noninferentially that, say, something is red; “the classical concept of a sense datum,” he insists, is a “mongrel,” a confused hybrid blending features of inner sensory episodes and noninferential knowings. But there is no primitive layer of brute sensory knowledge by acquaintance; instead, “basic word-world associations hold ... between ‘red’ and red *physical objects*, rather than between ‘red’ and a supposed class of private red particulars.”⁵ It is a mistake, these philosophers agree, to construe the qualities of things in the perceptual environment as qualities of experience itself, and then suppose that we have an immediate epistemic acquaintance with those inner qualities on the basis of which we must infer or construct our knowledge of the world.

Another error, Merleau-Ponty observes, is to suppose that objects are given to us in perception “fully developed and determinate” (*PP* 11/5/6). The two errors

are distinct, but they go hand-in-hand, for the notion that things are given to us with perfectly crisp and sharply delineated features provides covert support to the idea that perception involves some kind of inner awareness of the determinate qualities of experience itself, qualities perhaps even incorrigibly present to the mind. But experience rarely exhibits such sharply defined features, and no analysis of perception into discrete attitudes with crisply defined contents intending isolated qualities can capture the peculiar “perceptual milieu” (*PP* 58/47/54), always at once a “behavioral milieu” (*PP* 94/79/91), in which things show up for us under meaningful aspects. Suppose, Merleau-Ponty writes, that perception were merely the effect of a discrete stimulus.

We ought, then, to perceive a segment of the world precisely delimited, surrounded by a zone of blackness, packed full of qualities with no interval between them, held together by definite relationships of size similar to those lying on the retina. The fact is that experience offers nothing like this, and we shall never, using the world as our starting point, understand what a *field of vision* is. (*PP* 11/5/6)

The edges of my visual field are nothing like the edges of a canvas or a movie screen, since they are in principle not objects I can look at, but the horizons of my looking: “The region surrounding the visual field is not easy to describe, but what is certain is that it is neither black nor gray.” Moreover, it is not as if things that fall just outside my visual field simply lapse into perceptual oblivion. Instead, “what is behind my back is not without some element of visual presence” (*PP* 12/6/6), for it still has a kind of perceptual availability as something there to be seen when I turn to look at it. The perceptual field thus cannot be equated with that range of objects directly affecting my sense organs at a given time.

“There is no physiological definition of sensation” (*PP* 16/9/11), yet it is tempting to try to define sensations in terms of the stimuli that cause them. Indeed, philosophical intuitions about the real character of our sensations, abstracted from the distorting effects of judgment, are regularly driven by assumptions concerning the external causes of our experience. If the Müller-Lyer illusion (Figure 1) involves a mistaken judgment about the relative lengths of the two lines, it is tempting to suppose that the underlying sensations must be sensations of lines of equal length. The lines themselves are the same length, after

all, and surely our sensations do no more than register the effects of those causal sources of our experience.

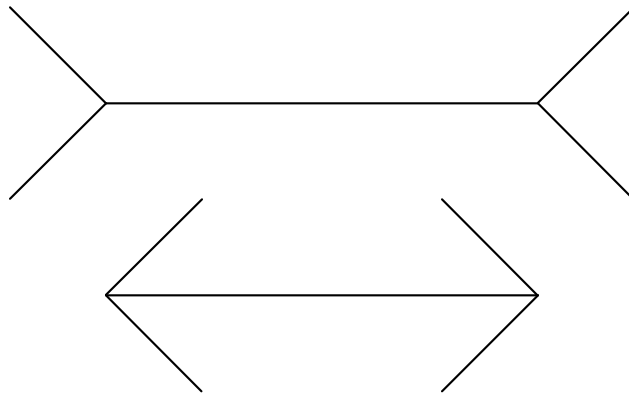


Figure 1 The Müller-Lyer illusion

However, this “constancy hypothesis,”⁶ which stipulates a strict correlation between stimulus and sensation, immediately confronts a plethora of counterexamples. Small patches of yellow and black side by side look green, while red and green patches together look gray. Motion pictures create an effect of movement by presenting the eye with a series of discrete still pictures in rapid succession. And the gray squares in Figure 2 look strikingly different, though they are in fact the same shade.

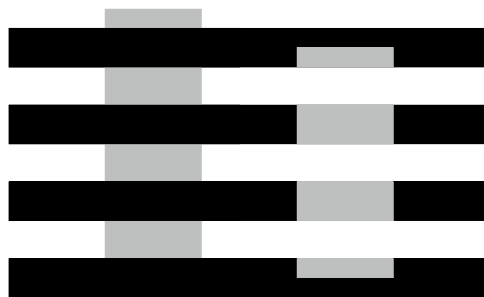


Figure 2 White's illusion

So, while it is tempting to define sensations in terms of stimuli, the fact is that there is no isomorphism between the contents and the causes of perception. And even if there were, the concept of sensation would be no better off. For the ordinary notion of sensation is meant to capture *how things look*. Since stimuli

turn out not line up in any neat way with how things look, the concept of sensation they motivate could only stand in a dubious relation at best to the phenomenology it was originally meant to describe.

The constancy hypothesis thus stands in need of auxiliary hypotheses to save it from sheer implausibility, and Merleau-Ponty first considers the classic empiricist response, namely, that sensations, having initially been fixed by the stimuli, subsequently undergo modification by the effects of association and memory. But ad hoc appeals to such cognitive operations are doomed to both obscurity and circularity: obscurity because these notions tell us only *that* some sensations elicit others, not *how* they manage to do so, that is, in virtue of what features or powers; circularity because the concepts of association and memory themselves presuppose the very perceptual significance they were supposed to explain.

The sensation of one segment or path in the figure of a circle, for example, may trigger an association by resembling another, “but this resemblance means no more than that one path makes one think of the other,” so that our knowledge of objects “appears as a system of substitutions in which one impression announces others without ever justifying the announcement.” The introduction of association and memory in the analysis, that is, sheds no light on the putative transition from discrete atoms of sensation to a perceptually coherent gestalt. Instead, for empiricism, “The significance of the perceived is nothing but a cluster of images that begin to reappear without reason” (*PP* 22/15/17).

Worse yet, the empiricist principle of the “association of ideas” takes for granted precisely the kind of perceptual coherence it is intended to explain. For what we in fact associate or group together, when we do, are things and the meaningful features of things, not sensations or atomic qualities. And a thing is a coherent whole, an ensemble, not a collection of discrete parts: “The parts of a thing are not bound together by a merely external association” (*PP* 23/15/18); rather, the inner coherence of the things we perceive is what enables us to abstract aspects or features we can then associate with one another:

It is not indifferent data that set about combining into a thing because de facto contiguities or resemblances cause them to associate; it is, on the contrary, because we perceive a grouping as a thing that the analytical attitude can then discern resemblances and contiguities. (*PP* 23/16/18–19)

As an attempt to save the concept of sensation, then, the empiricist principle of association reverses the true order of explanation, mistaking an effect of perceptual significance for its cause. The principle of association thus begs the question of perceptual meaning, for “the unity of the thing in perception is not constructed by association, but is a condition of association” (*PP* 24/17/19–20).

In addition to this negative point, Merleau-Ponty adds a positive phenomenological account of the emergence of perceptual coherence as an alternative to the crudely mechanistic theory of the association of ideas. Perception, he suggests, involves the organism in a constant fluctuation between states of tension and equilibrium, and the very unity of a perceived object amounts to a kind of solution, or anticipated solution, to a problem we register not intellectually, but “in the form of a vague uneasiness” (*PP* 25/17/20). I adjust my body, for example by turning my head and moving my eyes, squinting or cupping a hand around my ear, leaning forward, standing up, reaching, trying all the while to achieve a “best grip” (*meilleure prise*) on the world (*PP* 309/267/311). Eventually, things come into focus, and my environment strikes me as organized and coherent; my surroundings make sense to me, and I can find my way about. Only then do I recognize things and establish “associations” among them. An impression can arouse another impression, Merleau-Ponty remarks, “only provided that it is already *understood* in the light of the past experience in which it coexisted with those we are concerned to arouse” (*PP* 25/17/20).

Appealing to memory as a way of salvaging the constancy hypothesis is subject to the same objections. For memory, like association, is possible only against a background of perceptual coherence and cannot, on pain of circularity, be invoked to explain it. Memory cannot “fill in” the gaps in the sensations that must, on the constancy hypothesis, result from the poverty of our retinal images, for “in order to fill out perception, memories need to have been made possible by the character (*physionomie*) of what is given.” What is capable of evoking a memory is not a decontextualized sense datum, but something one perceives and recognizes as familiar and meaningful under an aspect. Like association, then,

the appeal to memory presupposes what it is supposed to explain: the patterning of data, the imposition of meaning on a chaos of sensation. At

the moment the evocation of memories is made possible, it becomes superfluous, since the work we put it to is already done. (*PP* 27/19/23)

My present experience must already have some definite character or aspect, after all, in order to evoke *this* particular memory and not some other. In the end, Merleau-Ponty concludes, reference to the mind's unconscious "projection of memories" as a constitutive principle at work in all perceptual experience is a "bad metaphor" that obscures the structure of perception and memory alike (*PP* 28/20/23).

The distinctions between figure and ground, things and the empty spaces between them, past and present are not rooted in sensation, but are "structures of consciousness irreducible to the qualities that appear in them" (*PP* 30/22/26). Merleau-Ponty knows that he has no knock-down a priori argument against the atomism of empiricist epistemology, but it is enough to show that the concept of sensation lacks the phenomenological support and the explanatory force that would have to speak in its favor to vindicate it. The atomistic level of description will seem to be providing a more accurate picture of reality, he says, "as long as we keep trying to construct the shape of the world, life, perception, the mind, instead of recognizing as the immanent source and as the final authority of our knowledge of such things, the *experience* we have of them" (*PP* 31/23/27).

The concept of sensation is incoherent, then, since it is meant to serve two incompatible functions: first, to capture the actual content of perceptual experience; second, to explain how that experience is brought about by causal impingements on our sensory surfaces. The concept fails in the first effort precisely because of its service to the second, and vice versa. For when it describes the phenomena adequately, it explains nothing, and when it is subsequently invoked, along with auxiliary hypotheses concerning association and memory, to explain away the manifest phenomena, it no longer describes them as they are.

II. JUDGMENT

Since perceptual phenomena so clearly depart from what the concepts of sensation, association, and memory seem to demand, it is natural to suppose that the actual order of appearance must lie buried beneath a layer of cognition that actively restructures it, either wholly or in part. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls

the “intellectualist antithesis” of empiricism, which lay at the heart of Cartesian and Kantian epistemology, and which continues to inform cognitivist theories of perception today. Descartes was perhaps an extreme case, insisting as he did that perception is not strictly speaking a bodily process at all, but the activity of an incorporeal mind. And yet contemporary physicalists like Daniel Dennett are no less adamant than their rationalist predecessors that perception must be organized by, indeed that it just *is*, thought or judgment. For Descartes and Kant, the very fact that it is *things* that we see, as opposed to mere clusters of qualities, is due to our application of the concept of substance to the manifold of intuition provided passively by the senses.⁷

As we have seen, the constancy hypothesis assumes an isomorphism between stimulus and perception. One might suppose that that assumption is peculiar to empiricism, but as Merleau-Ponty points out, intellectualist theories rely on it as much or more, precisely in order to demonstrate that perceptual awareness is a product of active cognition, not of passive receptivity. Sensations, that is, if they exist at all, are perfectly determinate, but lie buried beneath the threshold of conscious awareness, then the spotlight of attention shines on them and brings them to consciousness. Thus in the Second Meditation Descartes insists that objects are strictly speaking “perceived by the mind alone,” not by the senses. Perception of a piece of wax melting, changing its qualities, and yet remaining one and the same piece of wax is a “purely *mental* scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I *concentrate* on what the wax consists in.”⁸ For Descartes, then, imperfect or confused perception is not a matter of having defective or obscure material available for mental scrutiny, but of *scrutinizing* it imperfectly or confusedly. What is given is given by God and cannot be imperfect; error and illusion flow from our own willful misconstructions. So, for the intellectualist, as Merleau-Ponty says, “The moon on the horizon is not, and is not seen to be, bigger than at its zenith: if we look at it attentively, for example through a cardboard tube or a telescope, we see that its apparent diameter remains constant” (*PP* 35/27/32). What is literally given in perception, then, the intellectualist and the empiricist agree, is fixed by the stimulus.

But this means that attention and judgment can effect no change from perceptual obscurity to clarity after all, since there was no confusion in the

sensations themselves to begin with, only in the vagaries of thought or will. Consequently, “attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform.” It is not as if our experience is a muddle and then the mind operates on it and sorts it out; rather, perceptual indistinctness is always only a matter of failing to attend carefully and judge correctly. “What intellectualism lacks,” Merleau-Ponty observes, “is contingency in the occasions of thought” (*PP* 36/28/32). In this way, empiricism and intellectualism are two sides of a coin, the former rendering the transition from experience to judgment inexplicable, the latter taking it for granted by building thought into the very definition of perceptual objectivity: “Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.” In both, “the indeterminate does not enter into the definition of the mind” (*PP* 36/28/33).

More recent cognitivist theories of perception have dispensed with this problem concerning the relation between experience and judgment by dispensing with the very idea that anything is given in experience at all, prior to or independent of our judgment about it. Dennett, for example, radicalizing Sellars’s attack on the Myth of the Given, insists that there can be no difference between the way things *seem* to us and the way we *think* they seem. What he calls his “*first-person operationalism* ... denies the possibility in principle of consciousness of a stimulus in the absence of the subject’s belief in that consciousness.”⁹ For Dennett, then, as for Descartes, experience is thought or cognition “all the way down.” Indeed, Dennett is an even more extreme intellectualist than Descartes, for whereas Descartes’s characterization of all mental phenomena as modes of “thought” is largely a terminological idiosyncrasy, Dennett maintains that every conscious experience, even the most visceral and concrete, is literally a kind of judgment or supposition that something is the case.¹⁰

To make this point, Dennett refers to the phi phenomenon, first so called by the Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer. Phi movement is the apparent movement perceived in such things as the flashing lights in the headline “Zipper” in Times Square, or the rapid sequence of still photographs that make up a motion picture. Quite apart from whether anything in the world is really moving,

the relevant phenomenological question is whether we *really see* (apparent) movement or merely *think* we see it?¹¹ From enough of a distance, it seems obvious that we really do *seem to see* movement, but as we get closer, it is not clear whether we are literally seeing movement or merely *judging that* what we are seeing looks as if it's moving. More specifically, ask yourself if you (seem to) see the letters on the zipper or the figures in the movie flowing *continuously*? Since it is impossible at any given moment to see into the future, must you not in fact be registering each successive image and then inferring back to an intermediate position between it and the one preceding it, an intermediate position that was not in fact visually present to you? And does this not amount to constructing a mere belief that you are seeing continuous motion, as opposed to literally seeing it in some nonepistemic sense?¹²

The conclusion Dennett draws from psychological experiments involving these kinds of nearly instantaneous perceptual effects and the reports subjects give of them is not just that there are peculiar borderline cases midway between attitudes about perceptions and perceptions themselves, but the much more radical thesis that, although we ordinarily suppose things are *given* in perception, and that we then form judgments about them, there is in fact no difference in principle between a perceptual experience and a judgment about a perceptual experience. To be sure, peculiar borderline cases are not confined to the psychology laboratory. If you are looking for Pierre in a café, you may have false sightings if isolated characteristic features jump out at you and catch your eye. The moment you think you see him, it may be perfectly indeterminate whether you *really see* a resemblance or merely *think* you see one. Are you responding to a genuinely present but misleading visual cue or simply jumping to a conclusion based on no good visual evidence at all? Foreign speech sounds like a continuous stream of sounds, but your own language sounds like discrete words. Do you literally *hear* the breaks between the words or merely insert them in thought? Indeterminate perceptual phenomena like these are neither simply passively received nor wholly spontaneously constructed in thought, but seem to be given with their perceptual significance already involuntarily integrated into our bodily response to them.

Rather than extend his phenomenology to include a positive account of this kind of perceptual ambiguity, however, Dennett flattens the field by simply

reducing perception to cognition. For him, quite literally, seeing is believing: to lack a belief about a perceptual experience is to lack the experience altogether. But why should we suppose that the borderline cases threaten the very distinction between experience and judgment? To say that there is only a gradual difference between the two, rather than a sharp boundary, is in no way to deny that there are unambiguous instances of each. I perceive the book on my desk without any commitment of judgment at all, just as I judge that it must be about two o'clock without the faintest glimmer of qualitative feeling. As Merleau-Ponty says,

Ordinary experience draws a perfectly clear distinction between sense experience and judgment. It sees judgment as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something valid for me at every moment of my life, and for other minds, actual or possible; sense experience, on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value ... This distinction disappears in intellectualism, because judgment is everywhere pure sensation is not, which is to say everywhere. The testimony of phenomena will therefore everywhere be impugned. (*PP* 43/34/39)

One could almost believe Merleau-Ponty had Dennett in mind when he wrote those words. Indeed, Dennett does not so much impugn the testimony of phenomena as silence it: "*There seems to be phenomenology*," he concedes. "But it does *not* follow from this undeniable, universally attested fact that *there really is* phenomenology."¹³ We *seem* to have experience underlying and supporting our judgments about it, but that seeming is itself just a false judgment. On Dennett's view, the phenomena themselves testify to nothing, since it is always only our judgments speaking in their stead. Ordinary experience, it seems, could hardly be more drastically mistaken about itself.

Yet the ironic effect of Dennett's intellectualism is a reinstatement of one of the prejudices of the Cartesian conception of the mind that materialists like him are otherwise so eager to discredit, namely the idea that we are incorrigible about our own mental states. For if my consciousness and my beliefs about my consciousness collapse into a single effect, it will be impossible for my beliefs to be wrong *about* my experience. More precisely, although one of my beliefs may be false about another, I will have at least one incorrigible belief, one belief that cannot be false with respect to my experience, namely, the belief that constitutes that experience. If Dennett wants to preserve the fallibility of such beliefs, he can

do so only by denying that they are about what they seem to be about, namely conscious experience. I may be mistaken if my judgment is really a judgment about the physical state of my brain, or if it lacks an object altogether. But if the judgment at once *constitutes* and is *about* my experience, then there will be no room for it to be false. Intellectualism entails a doctrine of incorrigibility, and Merleau-Ponty saw this: “if we see what we judge, how can we distinguish between true and false perception? How will we then be able to say that the halluciné or the madman ‘think they see what they do not see’? What will be the difference between ‘seeing’ and ‘thinking one sees’?” (PP 44/34–5/40). There is a difference between seeing and thinking one sees, not because “see” is a success verb, but because (success aside) things do not always *really* appear to me the way I *think* they appear, and intellectualism can make no sense of that distinction.

It is important to acknowledge, then, that when intellectualists insist that perceptions are constituted by judgments, they are in effect advocating a radical transformation of ordinary understanding and ordinary language. Perhaps they are simply instituting a new and different concept of judgment, which we ought not to confuse with the ordinary notion. But of course philosophers can say anything they like, if they allow themselves the freedom to cut new concepts out of whole cloth and tailor them to fit their theories. Besides, too much of what intellectualism says about judgment and its role in perception feeds on the ordinary notion for such a wholesale redefinition of the concept to carry conviction. The awkwardness of the intellectualist position is evident in the awkwardness of Kant’s concept of the manifold of intuition, which must be given for the imagination and the understanding to have something to work on, yet which cannot be given prior to having already been synthesized by those very faculties. Kant began in the first edition of the first *Critique* with a more robust notion of sensory appearance as distinct from the synthesized content of objective experience, but he had to banish that notion and leave it in limbo once he decided that subjects can be conscious of appearances themselves only thanks to the objectivity imposed by judgment. Intellectualism thus begs the questions, At *what* are the operations of the intellect directed? and, How do minds *orient* themselves at the outset vis-à-vis their objects? Trying to answer those questions simply by positing more and more judgments, deeper and deeper layers of

cognitive activity, “unconscious inferences” à la Helmholtz, or “micro-takings” à la Dennett,¹⁴ is either to defer an inevitable question indefinitely, or else be forced into an arbitrary redefinition of terms.

Consider a concrete example. In Zöllner’s illusion (Figure 3), the horizontal lines are parallel, but they seem to converge.

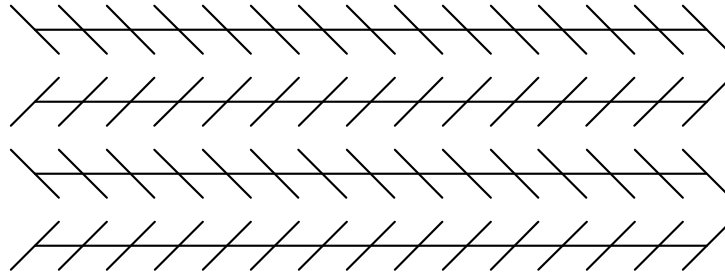


Figure 3 Zöllner’s illusion

“Intellectualism,” Merleau-Ponty observes, “reduces the phenomenon to a simple mistake.” But the mistake remains inexplicable. “The question ought to arise: how does it come about that it is so difficult in Zöllner’s illusion to compare in isolation the very lines that have to be compared in the given task? Why do they refuse in this way to be separated from the auxiliary lines?” (*PP* 44/35/40–1). The erroneous judgment that is supposed to explain the perceptual appearance in this case begs a question that can only be answered by further phenomenological description of the recalcitrant appearance itself. If I judge falsely, it is because my judgment is motivated by an appearance that is not itself a judgment, but rather “the spontaneous organization and the particular configuration of the phenomena.” The auxiliary lines break up the parallelism, “But why do they break it up?” (*PP* 45/36/41–2). Is that, too, the effect of a mistaken judgment? But why do I continue to make the mistake? Our concept of intellectual error presumes at least the possibility of some account of the perceptual source of the mistake, but intellectualism cannot in principle acknowledge that presumption, since it denies the availability, or indeed the very existence, of phenomenal appearances underlying the judgments we make about them.

What intellectualist theories of perception fail to acknowledge, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the embodiment and situatedness of experience, for they reduce perceptual content to the free-floating cognition of a disembodied subject:

Perception is thus thought about perceiving. Its incarnation furnishes no positive characteristic that has to be accounted for, and its hæcceity is simply its own ignorance of itself. Reflective analysis becomes a purely regressive doctrine, according to which every perception is just confused intellection, every determination a negation. It thus does away with all problems except one: that of its own beginning. The finitude of a perception, which give me, as Spinoza put it, “conclusions without premises,” the inherence of consciousness in a point of view, all this reduces to my ignorance of myself, to my negative power of not reflecting. But that ignorance, how is it itself possible? (*PP* 47–8/38/44)

Intellectualism is not just a phenomenological distortion, then, but an incoherent doctrine pretending to explain perceptual appearances the very accessibility or even existence of which the doctrine cannot consistently admit. And yet descriptions of supposedly constitutive perceptual judgments always turn out to be descriptions of perceptual receptivity. For intellectualism, that is, “Perception is a judgment, but one that is unaware of its own foundations,¹⁵ which amounts to saying that the perceived object is given as a totality and a unity before we have apprehended the intelligible law governing it” (*PP* 52/42/48). What Descartes describes as the innate inclinations of the mind, and what Malebranche calls “natural judgment,” is just perception itself in its receptive aspect, in contrast to the spontaneity of the intellect. “The result,” Merleau-Ponty concludes, “is that the intellectualist analysis ends by rendering incomprehensible the perceptual phenomena it is supposed to explain” (*PP* 43/34/39).

The perceptual foundations of judgment become clearer when we consider aspects or gestalts that shift even while the discrete parts of objects remain constant. As Merleau-Ponty says, “perception is not an act of understanding. I have only to look at a landscape upside down to recognize nothing in it. (*PP* 57/46/54). Faces and handwriting undergo similar jarring transformations of character when viewed upside down or backwards, yet their objective structures remain the same from a purely intellectual point of view. Thus Merleau-Ponty concludes that intellectualism, like empiricism, tacitly thrives on the constancy hypothesis: the sensory stimuli are in a certain sense objectively the same forward as backward, right side up as upside down, therefore the qualitative

difference in perceptual aspect can only be an artifact of a change of intellectual attitude. You cannot see what is not there, so when a perceptual effect fails to correspond to the supplied stimulus, you are not literally *seeing* what you seem to see, but merely *thinking* you see it. Arguments purporting to uncover massive illusions in normal visual experience take the constancy hypothesis for granted in just this way. You seem to see a regular pattern across a large expanse of wallpaper, more or less instantaneously, but your eyes cannot be saccading to all the discrete spots on the wall in order to piece together the pattern bit by bit, therefore you must be *judging* rather than literally *seeing* its regularity. The illusion is not that you are seeing something that is not there, but that you think you are *seeing* what you are in fact merely *surmising*.¹⁶

But why should we accept the constancy hypothesis? Why not suppose instead that we often see things precisely by having them in our peripheral vision, especially in cases where we are sensitized to notice just those salient features that make them relevant to what we are looking at, or looking for? Parafoveal vision is not just an impoverished form of foveal vision, otherwise phenomenologically equivalent. Peripheral vision has abilities and liabilities all its own, quite unlike those of direct visual scrutiny. By arbitrarily applying a single preconceived criterion of perceptual success across the board, namely accurate registration of discrete stimuli, intellectualism systematically ignores the qualitative phenomenological differences that distinguish our diverse sensory capacities and therefore underestimates the complexity and sophistication of the perceptual mechanisms involved in bringing the world before our eyes.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, although perception is not grounded in sensations, the gestalts in which things are given perceptually constitute a primitive aspect of experience, irreducible to cognition: “there is a significance of the percept that has no equivalent in the universe of the understanding, a perceptual milieu that is not yet the objective world, a perceptual being that is not yet determinate being” (*PP* 58/46–7/54). Intellectualism ignores the indeterminacy of perception and helps itself uncritically to a view of the world as described by the physical sciences: “the real flaw of intellectualism lies precisely in its taking as given the determinate universe of science” (*PP* 58/47/54). Only by bracketing that fully objective description of the world, the description that aspires to a view from nowhere, as it were, and stepping back from the theoretical achievements of

scientific theory to our ordinary situated perspective on our familiar environment, can we recover the abiding naiveté that constitutes the positive organizing principle of our conscious lives. For the world as given in perception is not the world as described by science, nor even the world as described in prescientific cognition: “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them” (*PP* v/x-xi/xi).

Perception understood as a background condition of intelligibility, the intelligibility both of judgments and of the misbegotten concept of sensation, is an inheritance we are already intimately familiar with as children, long before we are in a position to comprehend the world or ourselves from the depersonalized standpoint of science:

The child lives in a world he unhesitatingly believes to be accessible to all around him; he has no consciousness of himself or of others as private subjectivities, nor does he suspect that we are all, himself included, limited to a certain point of view on the world. ... Men are, for him, empty heads turned toward a single self-evident world ... (*PP* 407/355/413)

That naive mentality of the child, Merleau-Ponty believes, harbors a wisdom of its own precisely in virtue of its prereflective, pretheoretical phenomenal integrity, which survives vestigially but unmistakably beneath the cognitive accretions of self-conscious maturity. Indeed, “it must be that children are right in some sense, as opposed to adults ... and that the primitive thinking of our early years abides as an indispensable acquisition underlying those of adulthood, if there is to be for the adult a single intersubjective world” (*PP* 408/355/414). It is that underlying phenomenal inheritance or acquisition that an adequate phenomenology of perception must aspire to describe.

III. THE PHENOMENAL FIELD

Judgment is indeed grounded in perception, then, but perception is no mere camera-like confrontation with inert sensory particulars, à la the Myth of the Given. But if the concept of sensation is incoherent and the reduction of perception to judgment untenable, how are we then to characterize the perceptual field phenomenologically? Clearing a path between empiricism and intellectualism is one of the central aims of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, one

that requires a new conceptual framework and a new descriptive vocabulary with which to understand intentionality as the necessary interconnectedness of experience and the world. The notion of a primal interrelation, what Merleau-Ponty would later call the “intertwining” (*entrelacs*) or “chiasm” of body and world (VI, chapter 4), serves as an antidote to the abstractions of pure receptivity and pure spontaneity that have dominated traditional philosophy of mind. In *Phenomenology*, long before he began to describe the “flesh” common to percipients and their perceptible worlds (VI 169/127, et passim), Merleau-Ponty had already effectively reconceived perception itself as neither a mere passive registration of stimuli nor a radically free initiation of mental acts, but as the way in which the body belongs to its environment, the interconnectedness of sensitivity and motor response.

The point is not just that there is a close causal connection between perception and bodily movement, which nonetheless remain conceptually distinct. Even Descartes observes, “I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with” my body, “so that I and the body form a unit.”¹⁷ If Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the overlap or dovetailing of perception and movement is to be more than mere rhetoric, it must constitute a fundamental challenge to the conceptual distinction between the mental and the material that generates the appearance of a mind-body problem to begin with, and that philosophers of mind today still take largely for granted. For Merleau-Ponty, that is, body and world are conceptually, not just causally, two sides of the same coin. The world and I are intelligible each only in light of the other. My body is perceptible to me only because I am already perceptually oriented in an external environment, just as the environment is available to me only through the perceptual medium of my own body:

for if it is true that I am conscious of my body via the world, that it is the unperceived term in the center of the world toward which all objects turn their face, it is true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several faces because I could walk around them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world by means of my body. (PP 97/82/94–5)

What this essential interdependence of ourselves and the world entails is that our bodily orientation and skills constitute for us a normatively rich but

noncognitive relation to the perceptual milieu. More precisely, what allows our perceptual attitudes to be right or wrong about the world in the most basic way is the sense of bodily equilibrium that determines which postures and orientations allow us to perceive things *properly*, and which by contrast constitute liabilities, incapacities, discomforts, distortions. We have, and feel ourselves to have, optimal bodily attitudes that afford us a “best grip” (*meilleure prise*) on things (PP 309/267/311), for example the best distance from which to observe or inspect an object, a preferred stance in which to listen or concentrate, to achieve poise and balance within the gravitational field. The intentionality of perception is thus anchored in what Merleau-Ponty calls the “motor intentionality” (PP 128/110/127) of our bodily skills. Indeed, even without our conscious or voluntary control, our bodies are constantly adjusting themselves to integrate and secure our experience and maintain our effective grip on things:

my body has a grip on the world when my perception offers me a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive from the world the responses they anticipate. This maximum distinctness in perception and action defines a perceptual *ground*, a basis of my life, a general milieu for the coexistence of my body and the world. (PP 289–90/250/292)

Our constant self-correcting bodily orientation in the environment constitutes the perceptual background against which discrete sensory particulars and explicit judgments can then emerge: “our body is not the object of an ‘I think’: it is an ensemble of lived meanings that moves to its equilibrium” (PP 179/153/177).

Perception is thus informed by what Merleau-Ponty calls a “body schema” (*schéma corporel*), which is neither a purely mental nor a merely physiological state. The body schema is not an image of the body,¹⁸ and so not an object of our awareness, but rather the bodily skills and capacities that shape our awareness of objects. In the Schematism chapter of the first *Critique* Kant conceived of schemas as organizing principles for the construction of images, principles he thought played an essential role in constituting the objectivity of experience. For Kant, however, a schema could play that structuring role only by being an explicit rule, which is to say a kind of cognitive content. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of intentionality, by contrast, is nonrepresentational and noncognitive, but his concept of the body schema is analogous to Kant’s insight that intentional

content does not just magically crystalize in the mind, but is so to speak sketched out in advance by the dispositions that allow things to appear to us as they do. Whereas Kant understood those dispositions as intellectual rules or procedures, Merleau-Ponty ascribes them to the bodily poise or readiness that gives us a felt sense rightness or equilibrium and so allows us to regard our own perceptions as either right or wrong, normal or skewed, true or false.

That bodily capacities and dispositions of various sorts *causally* underlie our perceptual orientation in the world is obvious; that those capacities and dispositions establish a *normative* domain without which perception could not be intentional, is not. Indeed, what makes motor intentionality worthy of the name is precisely its normativity, that is, the felt rightness and wrongness of the different postures and positions we unthinkingly assume and adjust throughout our waking (and sleeping) lives. Felt differences between manifestly better and worse bodily attitudes thus constitute normative distinctions between right and wrong, indeed true and false, perceptual appearances: the words on the chalkboard are a blur, so I squint and crane my neck to see them better; the voice is muffled, so I turn, lean forward, put my hand to my ear; the sweater looks black until I hold it directly under the light and see that it is really green.¹⁹

It is easy to overlook the normativity of our bodily orientation in the world precisely because it is so basic and so familiar to us. Yet, Merleau-Ponty argues, that orientation constitutes a form of intentionality more primitive than judgment, more primitive even than the application of concepts. The rightness and wrongness of perceptual appearances is essentially interwoven with the rightness and wrongness of our bodily attitudes, and we have a feel for the kinds of balance and posture that afford us a correct and proper view of the world. Perception is not just a mental or psychological effect in the mind, then, but the body's normative orientation in the world. Abstracting perception from the body and from the world by equating it with sensation or judgment means doing violence to the concept of perception itself. More precisely, it means doing violence to the experience that affords us an understanding of perception in the first place, and surely the understanding of perception that is actually informed and motivated by experience is the only one worth having.

NOTES

- ¹ Intellectualism is roughly equivalent to what used to be called rationalism and what is nowadays called cognitivism. Merleau-Ponty inherits his terminology from fin-de-siècle psychology. In the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology*, for example, William James distinguishes between “Intellectualism” and “Sensationalism,” and between “sensationalist and intellectualist philosophies of mind” (I: 244–5, 250). As we shall see, however, whereas James ascribes to intellectualists like Helmholtz and Wundt the Kantian view that sensations exist, but “*are combined* by activity of the Thinking Principle” (II: 27; cf. II: 218–19), Merleau-Ponty identifies intellectualism as the more radical idea that perceptual content is itself constituted, not just organized or affected, by acts of judgment. Intellectualists of this latter sort, that is, for example Descartes and contemporary cognitivists like Daniel Dennett, intellectualize perception more thoroughly by construing it as cognitive or judgmental “all the way down.”
- ² John Searle makes much the same point, if more vividly, when he writes, “it is a category mistake to suppose that when I see a yellow station wagon the visual experience itself is also yellow and in the shape of a station wagon. Just as when I believe that it is raining I do not literally have a wet belief, so when I see something yellow I do not literally have a yellow visual experience. One might as well say that my visual experience is six cylindered or that it gets twenty-two miles to the gallon as say that it is yellow or in the shape of a station wagon.” Searle, *Intentionality*, 43.
- ³ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §§418, 422.
- ⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29.
- ⁵ Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” §§7, 29; *Science, Perception and Reality*, 132, 161.
- ⁶ See Köhler, “On Unnoticed Sensations and Errors of Judgment,” in *The Selected Papers of Wolfgang Köhler*.
- ⁷ “And so,” Descartes writes in the Second Meditation, “something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind.” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II; AT VII 32. Similarly, Kant writes, “all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories, and since experience is cognition through connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B161.
- ⁸ Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, Vol. II; AT VII 31, emphasis added.
- ⁹ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 132.
- ¹⁰ In *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes defines “thought” (*cogitationis*) as “everything which we are aware of as happening within us, in so far as we have awareness of it. Hence, *thinking* is to be identified here not merely with understanding, willing and imagining, but also with sensory awareness” (*Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. I, AT VIII 7; cf. *Meditations*, op. cit., Vol. II; AT VII 34). The equation Descartes draws between sensory awareness and thought thus appears to fix the meaning of the latter term, rather than take the received sense for granted and assert something implausible. Dennett’s theory is the implausible thesis itself, as he himself concedes.

- ¹¹ Again, although “see” is usually understood as a success verb, the question is not whether something really is moving, but the content of our experience, what our experience purports. I therefore say “(apparent) movement” to indicate that the point here concerns the *experience* of seeing, not its veridicality. Alternatively, one could ask whether or not we *really seem to see* the movement.
- ¹² Dennett describes experiments conducted by Paul Kolers in which subjects shown discontinuous changes in color and shape report seeing them occurring gradually and continuously, so that the perceptual effect could only have emerged in retrospect, which suggests that the subjects may be fabricating (false) beliefs after the fact regarding what they saw at an earlier moment. Dennett’s conclusion, however, is that there is nothing to choose between the apparently conflicting claims that the experience was indeed a conscious perception and that it consisted simply in the formation of a retrospective belief. See Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 114–26.
- ¹³ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 366. By “phenomenology” Dennett doesn’t mean the philosophical movement or method, but putative qualities of consciousness apart from our judgments about them.
- ¹⁴ Dennett, “Real Consciousness.” *Brainchildren*, 133–4.
- ¹⁵ Here Merleau-Ponty quotes the Sixth Meditation: “These and other judgments that I made concerning sensory objects, I was apparently taught to make by nature; for I had already made up my mind that this was how things were, before working out any arguments to prove it.” Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, Vol. II; AT VII 76.
- ¹⁶ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 354–5. Cf. J. K. O’Regan, R. A. Rensink, J. J. Clark, “Change-Blindness as a Result of ‘Mudsplashes,’” 34; and S. J. Blackmore, G. Brelstaff, K. Nelson, T. Troscianko, “Is the Richness of our Visual World an Illusion? Transsaccadic Memory for Complex Scenes,” 1075.
- ¹⁷ Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, Vol. II; AT VII 81.
- ¹⁸ Unfortunately, the standard English edition of *Phenomenology* mistranslates “*schéma corporel*” as “body image.”
- ¹⁹ For a more detailed account of this kind of perceptual normativity, see Sean Kelly’s essay in this volume.