SEAN DORRANCE KELLY

3 Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty

Just as the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things ... so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said.

Merleau-Ponty

This passage comes from the opening pages of "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty's essay on Edmund Husserl. It proposes a risky interpretive principle. The main feature of this principle is that the seminal aspects of a thinker's work are so close to him that he is incapable of articulating them himself. Nevertheless, these aspects pervade the work; give it its style, its sense, and its direction; and therefore belong to it essentially. As Martin Heidegger writes, in a passage quoted by Merleau-Ponty in the essay, "The greater the work of a thinker – which in no way coincides with the breadth and number of writings – the richer is what is unthought in this work, which means, that which emerges in and through this work as having not yet been thought."[1] The goal of Merleau-Ponty's essay, he says, is "to evoke this unthought-of element in Husserl's thought" (*S* 202/160).

The risk of such an interpretive strategy is evident. By identifying the essence of a thinker's work with ideas that he never explicitly endorsed, indeed, by allowing for the possibility that the ideas he did explicitly endorse are in contradiction with the essence of his thought, the interpreter runs the risk of recklessness. Yet there is something to the strategy.

In the first place, it seems clear that great works do have a style, a sense, a direction in which they point. This is true both for individual works of art and for the overall oeuvre of an artist. It is because

Titian's style runs throughout his work, for example, that we can often recognize a piece as a Titian without knowing which of his paintings it is. The Titian oeuvre has a style that is recognizable in all of its central works. Yet each individual work manifests the style in a different way. It is because a particular painting uniquely manifests an overall style that copying it can be such a difficult task. The style of a work is not something that one can copy as if mechanically tracing its lines. It is something that is manifest in the lines, but something that goes beyond them as well.

Moreover, the style of an oeuvre, like the style of an individual or an epoch, is so pervasive that it recedes into the background and is largely invisible to those who manifest it most. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty believes that *we* can recognize an artist's style better than the artist can himself. Merleau-Ponty writes, for example, in *The Prose of the World,*

> To the extent that the painter has already painted and is in some measure master of himself, what is given to him with his style is not a certain number of ideas or tics that he can inventory but a manner of formulation that is just as recognizable for others and just as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures. (*PM* 82/58)

Great works of philosophy, like great works of art, have this character as well. The style of a thinker's thought, its unthought element in other words, is more easily recognizable by others than it is by the thinker himself.

Finally, background phenomena like a style or a form of life are holistic and can therefore withstand local contradiction. We can say, for example, about a particular painting by Cézanne, not only that it is *in his style* but also that it is *not his style at its best.* This is an interpretive claim to be sure, but it need not be a reckless one. We need only admit that not everything produced *by* Cézanne is produced *in the style of* Cézanne, to make it possible for such a claim to be responsible.

Why are these comments apposite here? Although I do believe they provide a key to the interpretive strategy that Merleau-Ponty uses in his essay on Husserl, this chapter is not about interpretation. Rather, I begin with this discussion of background and style because I believe it both illustrates and licenses the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work that I give here. It illustrates my interpretation

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because, as I hope to argue, Merleau-Ponty's view of perception depends on the idea that the background of our perception of objects and their properties, like the background understanding of a thinker, must recede from view and yet functions everywhere to guide what is focally articulate. It licenses my interpretation because, as I will show, Merleau-Ponty didn't quite get his own view right.

I did not set out to write the essay this way. Indeed, when I realized that Merleau-Ponty does not say some of the things I thought he should, I wondered whether all along I had been seeing things in his work that simply are not there. I became convinced, however, that what he does say points unequivocally in the direction of an overall view that he seems not to have been able to articulate himself. I leave it to the reader to determine whether the interpretation I give is reckless or responsible. In any event, there is no doubt that it forms the type of history of philosophy that stands on the "middle-ground where the philosopher we are speaking about and the philosopher who is speaking are present together, although it is not possible even in principle to decide at any given moment just what belongs to each" (*S* 202/159). Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, thought that this way of engaging with a philosopher is the best way to be faithful to him. I hope he was right.

I. THE PROBLEM OF SEEING THINGS

Near the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes an apparently astounding claim. It is part of my experience of the world, he says, that objects *see* one another:

> To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*.... Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can "see"; the back of my lamp is nothing other than the face which it "shows" to the chimney. I can therefore see an object insofar as objects form a system or a world and insofar as each of them treats the others around it like spectators of its hidden aspects and a guarantee of their permanence. (*PP* 82–3/68/79, translation modified)[2]

The claim that I experience objects as *seeing* one another is central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the way in which I experience objects as *transcending*, or going beyond, my experience of them.

It is central, in other words, to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of what it is to see objects as full three-dimensional entities, despite only ever seeing them in perspectival presentations. Because of this, any attempt to understand Merleau-Ponty's account of object transcendence needs to grapple with this apparently astounding claim. Only in doing so will we be able to distinguish Merleau-Ponty's full-blooded phenomenology of perception from the more cognitivist accounts of perceptual experience found in such philosophers as Edmund Husserl and C. I. Lewis.

The problem of object transcendence poses itself most forcefully when we acknowledge the phenomenological distinction between experiencing something as a mere two-dimensional façade and experiencing it as a full three-dimensional entity. Indeed, until we have a good feel for this distinction, it can be difficult to understand the problem of object transcendence at all. In our everyday existence, however, this distinction is rarely made. The reason is that we almost always have experiences as of objects rather than as of mere façades. Despite only ever seeing my coffee mug from one perspective or another, for instance, I almost always experience it *as* a full three-dimensional entity. It is possible to experience something as a mere façade, however, whether it is one or not, and occasionally this happens.

Imagine visiting an old western movie set. When you first arrive, you might be amazed at how realistic everything looks. As you walk down the street, it really seems as though buildings rise up on either side. The bank really looks like it is a bank; the saloon really looks like it is a saloon; it really seems as though you've stepped into the Old West. Movie sets are constructed to fool you this way.

But they are movie sets after all, and a little bit of exploration reveals this fact. Walking through the saloon doors is nothing like walking into a saloon. The anticipation of a cool sarsaparilla, and even the anticipation of a room with chairs in it and a bar, is immediately frustrated in the movie set saloon. When you walk through the doors you see nothing but the supporting apparatus for the saloon façade and perhaps some stage materials hidden away. The same for what earlier looked to be a bank. It is revealed instead as a very convincing face supported by some two-by-fours and bags of sand. And so on for every structure on the street.

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If you explore the set enough in this way, then an amazing thing can happen. Now as you walk down the street, it doesn't look realistic at all. Instead of buildings on either side, it looks as if there are mere façades. Instead of feeling as if you're in the Old West, it feels as if you're on an Old West movie set. This is not because you can see through the doors to their empty backsides, or, indeed, because you "see" anything different at all (at least in one very limited sense of "to see"). Let us stipulate, in fact, that every light ray cast onto your retina is exactly the same as it was when you first arrived on the set. Still, your experience of the set can change, a gestalt shift can occur, so that the whole thing looks like a set full of façades instead of like an Old West town. This is the phenomenon I have in mind.[3]

Husserl was the first to identify this phenomenon as a central problem for philosophical theories of perception. Given that the only information projected onto the retina is information in (roughly) two dimensions, the fact that there is a difference between experiencing something as *having* only two dimensions (a façade) and experiencing it as *having* three (an object) is a puzzle. To do justice to this phenomenological distinction, Husserl argued, we must admit that the features of perceptual experience are not limited to those of the sense data occasioned by the object's front.[4] Indeed, Husserl claimed, we need to give some account of the way in which the *hidden* aspects of an experienced object – the backside it is experienced to have, for instance – are present to me in my experience of it. Without such an account, we have no resources to distinguish between the case in which the thing looks to be a façade and the case in which it looks to be an object.

In Husserl's account of object transcendence, the principal move is to distinguish between the features of the object that are experienced by me as *determinate* (roughly, those features for which I have sense data) and the features of the object that are experienced by me as *indeterminate* (roughly, everything else). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty adopts this terminology as well. I argue here, however, that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the category of the indeterminate is totally different from Husserl's. As a result, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of object transcendence is totally different, too. The puzzling passage about objects seeing one another, I claim, makes perfect sense once we have in mind Merleau-Ponty's complicated and interesting story about the experience of objects as three-dimensional.

I develop this interpretation in four stages. In section II, I discuss some textual evidence for the distinction between Husserl's account of the indeterminate and the account given by Merleau-Ponty. The distinction between absence and positive presence, I claim, is an important clue in teasing apart their positions. In section III, I begin to put some meat on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the indeterminate as a positive presence. In particular, I develop Merleau-Ponty's important idea that the visual background is indeterminate, in the sense that it is experienced normatively instead of descriptively. The test case for this story is that of color and its background lighting context. In section IV, I build on this idea to explain Merleau-Ponty's account of the transcendence of objects to our experience of them. In this section, I hope to make clear why Merleau-Ponty says that we experience objects as seeing one another. Finally, after a brief summary of the dialectic in section V, I offer some concluding thoughts in section VI. My main goal here is to contrast Merleau-Ponty's full phenomenological account of object perception with the more familiar, but less successful, kind of phenomenalist account found in the work of authors such as C. I. Lewis.[5]

II. MAKING THE INDETERMINATE A POSITIVE PHENOMENON

Merleau-Ponty gets from Husserl both the idea that we perceive objects as transcending what we determinately see of them and also the idea that one project of phenomenology is to describe the details of this experience. He moves beyond Husserl, however, in his characterization of the way in which we experience the indeterminate features of an object. The main difference between their views is that Husserl claims the indeterminate features of an object are *hypothesized but sensibly absent*, whereas Merleau-Ponty claims that they have a *positive presence* in our experience.

I have argued elsewhere that Husserl's account of object transcendence relies on a particular story about how the hidden features of an object are presented in experience.[6] The hidden features of an object include, for example, the color, shape, and size of the side of the object that is now hidden from view. Given that my perception of an object always takes place from one spatial point of view or another, I can only experience the object as a three-dimensional entity if I

experience it as having a hidden side. Yet in what way, if at all, do I experience the various features of the hidden side, such as its color, shape, and size?

On Husserl's account, these features are completely absent from the sensuous aspects of my experience. Rather, I *know* or *believe* or *hypothesize* or *expect* that the object has certain hidden features, but I do not, properly speaking, *see* it as such. In an early set of lectures, in fact, Husserl says that the hidden features of the perceived object appear to the subject only in an "improper" mode; "improperly appearing moments of the object," he says, "are in no way presented."[7]

On Husserl's account, therefore, the hidden features of an object are *indeterminate* in the sense that I have *not yet sensibly determined* what they are. I may have a certain hypothesis or belief about the shape of the backside of the object, but until I go around to the back and look, I will not have *determined* it for sure. In particular, there is nothing in "the material of sensation"[8] to indicate that the backside is any shape at all. In this sense, therefore, Husserl believes that the hidden features of an object are absent in my perceptual experience of it.

According to Merleau-Ponty, however, "we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (*PP* 12/6/7). The indeterminate features of the object are not merely features of which I have no current experience. As he says, "the perceived contains gaps which are not mere 'failures to perceive'" (*PP* 18/11/13). Rather, the indeterminate features are those that I am experiencing, although *not as determinate* features of the object: "There occurs here an *indeterminate vision*, a *vision of I do not know what* (*vision de je ne sais quoi*)," which nevertheless "is not without some element of visual presence" (*PP* 12/6/6). The project, for Merleau-Ponty, is to say what this positive but indeterminate experience is.

The distinction between the indeterminate as a perceptual absence and the indeterminate as a positive presence is crucial to understanding the relation between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. I do not know of anywhere in the voluminous literature on these authors, however, where this distinction has previously been discussed. In part, it may have gone unnoticed because of an inadequacy in the standard English translation of Merleau-Ponty's text. Even once the text is clear, however, the distinction can be difficult to identify. Let me begin by stating why I believe the standard translation is inadequate.

Merleau-Ponty describes an "indeterminate vision," the kind of visual experience we have of the hidden side of an object, for example, as a "*vision de je ne sais quoi*." In the standard English translation of Merleau-Ponty's text, this is rendered as a "vision of something or other." This translation precisely covers up the difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty, I do not have a vision of some *thing* or another, a thing which is itself determinate but which I have not yet determined. Rather, on Merleau-Ponty's view, I have a positive presentation of something indeterminate, a presentation of *an I do not know what*. The correct translation of the phrase, therefore, is quite literal: my experience of the backside of an object is "a vision of I do not know what."

Even with the corrected translation, however, the distinction between the two views can be difficult to discern. Let me therefore state it as clearly as I can. The difference is properly understood as a distinction in the scope of the indeterminacy. Husserl thinks that it is indeterminate, from the point of view of the current visual experience, what the features of the backside of the object are. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, thinks that my current visual experience contains something that is itself an indeterminate presentation of the back. For Husserl, it is not yet determined what I see; for Merleau-Ponty, what I see is indeterminate.

By analogy, consider the case of belief. There is a difference between not yet having made up your mind whether *A* or *B* on one hand, and positively affirming that *either A or B* on the other. In the first case, it is indeterminate (in the Husserlian sense of not yet determined) what you believe. In the second case, what you believe is indeterminate. This second case is not completely analogous to Merleau-Ponty's account of the indeterminacy of perception, however. The reason is that my perception of the hidden features of an object, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not indeterminate in the sense of being merely disjunctive. In what sense it is indeterminate, however, is a complicated question. This is the question I hope to answer in the following two sections.

III. THE INDETERMINACY OF THE VISUAL BACKGROUND: A NORMATIVE ASPECT OF VISUAL EXPERIENCE

The canonical kind of indeterminate visual presence, for Merleau-Ponty, is the visual presence of the background against which a figure appears. The background, insofar as it is experienced as a background, is visually present to a subject even though it makes no *determinate* contribution to his experience. To take a simple example, if I am looking at the lamp in front of me, then there is a sense in which the books, the wall, and the door behind it are all part of my visual experience. They are not determinate in my experience of them, however, the way the lamp might be thought to be. They are, in some sense yet to be clarified, present to me as indeterminate. In this section, I argue that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the indeterminacy of the visual background consists in its playing a normative rather than a descriptive role in visual experience.[9]

Perhaps the simplest example of visual background is the lighting context in which a color appears. Light itself can come in various colors, of course, and this can affect my experience of the color of an object in surprising and important ways. Yet even if we consider only the case of pure white light, the relative *brightness* of the light has an important effect on my experience of the color of the object to which I am attending. Within a certain range, the change in the brightness of the light will not affect the color I see the object *to be*. This is the so-called phenomenon of brightness constancy. Even if the color of the object seems to remain constant throughout changes in the lighting context, however, my experience of the color will change in some way or another whenever the surrounding light dims or brightens perceptibly. To do justice to the phenomenology of color experience, therefore, we must determine *in what way* changes in the lighting context affect my experience of the color of a thing. Merleau-Ponty will claim, against Husserl, that the experience of the lighting context is essentially normative; I see how the lighting *should* change in order for me to see the color better.

By contrast, consider first the view that Husserl holds. Husserl begins by emphasizing, with Merleau-Ponty, that changes in the context of perception produce changes in the experience of the color perceived.[10] He calls these changes "adumbrations" (*Abschattungen*) of the perceived color. These are not changes in what color I experience the object *to be*, but changes in the *way that color looks*. Husserl highlights this distinction from early in his career. He writes the following in *Logical Investigations*, for example: "Here it is enough to point to the readily grasped difference between the red of this ball, objectively seen as uniform, and the indubitable, unavoidable *Abschattungen* among the subjective color-sensations in our percept."[11] The *Abschattungen* of the color, therefore, are the various ways it can look, given various changes in the context of perception. Yet how, according to Husserl, do changes in the lighting context in particular change the way a color can look?

Husserl must believe that the lighting context contributes sensuously to my experience of the color. I do not know of a place where he says this explicitly, but it would be extremely odd, and totally unmotivated by his view, if he treated the lighting context like the hidden features of the object. The lighting is precisely *not* hypothesized but sensuously absent. To claim that the lighting is sensuously absent would be to claim that it in no way affects the sensory image I get of the object; but this is clearly false. I can *see* the changes attributable to the lighting context, even if we understand *seeing* in the narrow sense of being presented with sense data. Changes in the lighting context affect what literally appears to me; I do not merely *hypothesize* these changes to have occurred.

If this is right, then Husserl's account of lighting must be very different from his account of the hidden features of an object. Insofar as the lighting is not *absent* from my experience, it cannot be indeterminate in the sense that Husserl uses the term.[12] Lacking Merleau-Ponty's notion of indeterminacy as a positive phenomenon, therefore, we must understand Husserl to believe that the lighting context is experienced as a *determinate* quantity. On such a view, the brightness of the surrounding light is registered in experience as some measurable amount – ten foot-candles, for instance. Because all sensible presence is determinate, according to Husserl, he has no other option available.[13] Indeed, this kind of Husserlian view has become the orthodoxy in perceptual psychology. The standard cognitivist theory of brightness constancy, for example, is predicated on the assumption that light is experienced in this measurable form.[14]

In contrast to the Husserlian approach, Merleau-Ponty claims that the lighting context is experienced as the background against which

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the color of the object appears. The background features of experience, according to Merleau-Ponty, make a positive contribution to the phenomenology of perception. They are not, however, determinate in experience in the way that foreground features might be thought to be. As Merleau-Ponty says,

> Lighting and reflection, then, play their part only if they remain in the background as discreet intermediaries, and *lead* our gaze instead of arresting it. . . . The shade does not become really a shade . . . until it has ceased to be in front of us as something to be seen, but surrounds us, becoming our environment in which we establish ourselves. (*PP* 357–8/310–11/361–2)

To say that the lighting *leads* our gaze, or that it *becomes our environment,* is to insist that it plays some positive role in our experience. This positive role appears to be very different, however, from the kind of determinate visual presence the lighting would have if I experienced it as a measurable quantity. What can we say about the kind of indeterminate visual presence that background lighting has in experience? Perhaps it is best to start with an example.

Suppose you are looking at an object that is uniformly colored but unevenly lit. Perhaps it is a tabletop with a natural pattern of shadows across its surface. If asked to determine the color of the table, your eyes move automatically to the part on its surface where the lighting is best. Which part of the surface this is depends at least in part on the color being lit. Darker colors are seen better in brighter light, whereas brighter colors are seen better in dimmer light. What you as a perceiver seem to know immediately is where to move your eyes to see the color best.[15]

Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is that this is how lighting typically figures in experience. The lighting context presents itself not as a determinate quantity but rather in terms of how well it enables me to see the thing I'm looking at. Because of the pattern of shadows covering its surface, not every part of the tabletop is an equally good place to look if you want to get the best view of its color. This is not because the shadows make the tabletop look like *it is* a variety of colors. We can assume that the variation in lighting falls within the range of the brightness constancy effect. Even if it looks as if the surface *is* the same color throughout, however, the pattern of shadows nevertheless affects the way that color *looks*. Merleau-Ponty's idea is that this effect is a normative one: *here* the color looks as if it is not presented in the optimum way; *there* it looks better. As Merleau-Ponty says about the related background phenomena of distance from and perspective on the object,

> For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope. (*PP* 348/302/352)

Like the distance from and perspective on the object, according to Merleau-Ponty, the lighting context figures in experience by leading my gaze to the optimum place where the lighting best presents the color.[16]

There is a cognitivist reconstruction of this view that is tempting and, therefore, important to avoid. On such an account, the lighting context "leads my gaze" by presenting me with a series of determinate observations about the quantity of light throughout the scene; along with this series of determinate observations, it also posits some knowledge on the subject's part about which determinate amount of light is optimal for his viewing needs. In the case of the tabletop, for example, such a view would first attribute to the subject knowledge of the determinate quantity of light that is optimal for viewing the color of the table. Perhaps the table is green and twelve foot-candles is optimal for viewing this color. Then, for each section of the table, it posits a determinate experience of the amount of light falling on it. With the knowledge of this light gradient, the subject can then search for the part of the table that has closest to twelve foot-candles of light falling on it. Thus, the lighting "leads the gaze."

This is not the view Merleau-Ponty has in mind. I never experience the light as a determinate amount, according to Merleau-Ponty. Instead, I see, in a direct bodily manner, *how the light would have to change* for me to see the color *better*. The current lighting context, in other words, is experienced as a deviation from an optimum. As Merleau-Ponty says, I do not experience the lighting as some determinate level "which increases or decreases, but [as] a tension which fluctuates round a norm" (*PP* 349/302/352).[17] To speak mathematically, I experience the light not as a determinate quantity but in terms of the direction, and perhaps even the slope, of the improvement

curve. If we think of the improvement curve as the curve that measures the quantity of light against the quality of the viewing conditions, then what my experience tells me at any given moment is whether more or less light will improve my view, and also perhaps how drastic the improvement will be. In this way, the lighting plays a positive role in my experience but is never registered determinately.

My experience of the lighting context in this positive indeterminate sense is at the same time an experience of the color the object is. Recall that the color or shade of color I see the thing to be co-varies with the changes in lighting context that I see it to require. Darker shades of green require brighter light to see them well; lighter shades of green require dimmer light to see them well. Because different shades have different optimal lighting contexts, seeing the optimum to be in *that* direction is at the same time seeing the color to be one shade rather than another. Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes of a unified structure that encompasses both the lighting and the color lit (*PP* 354–6/307–8/357–9). This unified structure takes on its meaning for the perceiver through his direct bodily inclinations to act, given certain perceptual needs, in the face of it. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "Lighting and the constancy of the thing illuminated, which is its correlative, are directly dependent on our bodily situation" (*PP* 358/310/362).

Because of their interdependence, insofar as the lighting context is experienced in a direct, bodily manner as a deviation from a norm, so, too, is the color correlative to it. This is a surprising result. Even if the lighting is not experienced as a determinate quantity, you might have thought that the color it illuminates could nevertheless be experienced as a determinate shade. Because of the way figure and ground are interrelated, however, this simple view cannot make sense. Rather, each presentation of the color in a given lighting context necessarily makes an implicit reference to a more completely presented *real* color, the color as it would be better revealed if the lighting context were changed in the direction of the norm. This real color, implicitly referred to in every experience, is the constant color I see the object *to be*. Yet it is experienced not as a determinate shade, but rather as the background to the particular experience I'm having now. It is, in other words, like the normal context that reveals it, indeterminately present in every particular experience. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The real color persists beneath appearances as

the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a nonsensory [indeterminate] presence" (*PP* 352/305/356).

It is important to emphasize that the real color is *never* determinately seen. The reason for this is that the real color is defined as the color that is optimally illuminated by the lighting norm, and this lighting norm is never determinately experienced. Of course, the lighting norm may *be* determinate. It may be a fact of the matter, for example, that for a given subject on a given day a particular shade of green is seen optimally under twelve foot-candles of light. I have some doubts about whether this makes sense, but let us suppose it does.[18] Even when that subject on that day views that shade of green under twelve foot-candles of light, the real color is not presented to him determinately. The reason for this is that even when the lighting conditions are optimal, they are still experienced as a deviation from a norm, only in this case the current lighting is experienced as a "null" deviation from the norm. What I would have to do to get a better view of the shade is: nothing. I feel no inclination to look anyplace else at all to see the color better. Because this is still a normative feature of experience, the real shade it defines has features that the thing I see now does not: it remains constant, for example, as the lighting context deviates from the norm. The real color I see the object to be, therefore, is implicitly presented in every experience but always as the background to what I now see.[19]

Notice how unusual this notion of indeterminate visual presence is. Normally we think of perception as a kind of point for point descriptive representation of the visual features of the world. It is at root, on the traditional view, the projection of light rays onto the retina. To say that I see the lighting context as a deviation from a norm, however, is to say something radically different from this, namely, that it is a part of my visual experience that *my body is drawn to move,* or, at any rate, that *the context should change,* in a certain way. These are inherently normative, rather than descriptive, features of visual experience. They don't represent in some objective, determinate fashion the way the world *is*; they say something about how the world *ought to be* for me to see it better. In this way, Merleau-Ponty takes very seriously the idea that perception is a way of being involved with the world, not an objective, determinate way of recording it. As he writes,

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the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception. (*PP* 350/304/354)

IV. SEEING THINGS

When I introduced the notion of a visual background several pages ago, I gave perhaps the most obvious kind of example. I spoke there of the difference in my experience between the lamp I am looking at and the books, wall, and door that form the background to it. This is the kind of example Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he says that I experience objects as seeing one another. The way to get a handle on Merleau-Ponty's strange claim, therefore, is to try to figure out how the background objects are present to me in my experience of the figure on which I am focused. In this section, I extend the normative account of perception that we have already seen to the case of background objects and figural things.

1. Husserl on Spatial Figure and Ground

It is once again useful, by way of contrast, first to consider Husserl's view. Husserl addresses the issue of background objects explicitly in his later works under the name of the "outer horizon."[20] Even very early on, in the *Thing and Space* lectures of 1907, he is sensitive to the importance of the distinction between spatial figure and spatial ground. In the early works, Husserl sometimes calls the background objects "environing things" (*Dingumgebung*):

> a perceived thing is never there alone by itself; instead, it stands before our eyes in the midst of determinate, intuited environing things. For instance, the lamp rests on the table, amid books, papers, and other things. The environing things are equally "perceived." As the words "amid" and "environment" signify, this is a spatial nexus, which unifies the especially perceived thing with the other coperceived things.[21]

According to this passage, the environing things are experienced as in some way distinct from the figure (thus the different names), even though the two are "equally 'perceived.'" Husserl is emphasizing,

therefore, both *that there is a distinction* between experienced figure and experienced ground and *that both are essential* to experience. Yet what precisely is the distinction he has in mind? This passage does not tell us.

Husserl's answer to this question becomes clear a bit later in the text. The focal object, he claims, is the one to which we are *attending*; the background objects are the ones to which we are not now attending but to which we could, if we so desired, turn our attention: "What is perceived in the special sense is what we especially heed, what we attend to. The background things stand there, but we bestow on them no preferential attention."[22] On such a view, attention is a kind of mental searchlight that we can use to pick out certain objects instead of others. It is in terms of attention that Husserl hopes to explain the distinction between those objects that are experienced as figure and those that form the background against which the experienced figure stands out.

The main problem with this account is that it begs the question: attention seems to be a name for the distinction we are interested in rather than a characterization of it. Recall that Husserl is committed to the claim, as we saw in the previous passage, that both the focal object and the environing things are experienced as *determinate* entities. In this, therefore, our experience of each is on a par. The fact that we "attend" to one but not the others, that it is "perceived in the special sense" instead of merely "perceived," tells us only *that* figure and ground are experienced differently; it tells us nothing about *how* our experience of the figure is different from our experience of the ground.

Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty criticizes this notion of attention on the grounds that it destroys the phenomenological features of the figure–ground experience. In particular, he claims, it fails to allow for the possibility that the background objects could be presented indeterminately although positively, which is to say, *as background*.[23] If the environing objects are already determinate in my experience of the figure, there seems to be little sense to the claim that they form the background to it. Even though Husserl recognizes the *need* for a distinction between figure and ground, his account of the distinction obliterates it completely. Our task in developing Merleau-Ponty's account is to describe the way the environing objects are experienced *as background* to the focal thing.

2. *Merleau-Ponty's Approach: The View from Everywhere as the Norm for Seeing Things*[24]

Recall, as we learned in the case of lighting context, that background features of experience present themselves in terms of the effect they have on how the figure looks. In particular, they have a normative dimension: they tell me something about what should happen for me to get a better, fuller, or more complete experience of the focal thing. In the case of the lighting context, this just meant that the lighting was experienced in terms of how it would have to change for me to get a better view of the color. In the case of the background objects, although they do not actually shine light on it, they do stand in certain spatial relations to the focal thing. The way I understand these spatial relations, as we will see, can change my experience of the thing I am looking at.

To understand the background features of experience normatively, we defined the notion of a *normal* or *optimal* lighting context.[25] The normal lighting context, recall, is the one that allows me to get a maximum grip on the color I am looking at; it is the context that best reveals the color as it really is. Furthermore, the normal context is a *norm*: it is always that from which the current context is felt to be a deviation.[26] We can define a similar notion in the domain of spatial relations to the object. To do so, we must answer the following question: what is the perspective or point of view that would give me a maximum grip on something experienced as a three-dimensional object, that would most reveal the object as it really is? What is the *normal* spatial relation to it, in other words, from which all other perspectives are felt to deviate?

Here is where the analogy between lighting context and perspective begins to break down. Because objects are three-dimensional, there is no single point of view on the object that I could have that would reveal it maximally. There was such a lighting context (we were willing to suppose) – I could get lucky or even manipulate the situation in such a way as to make it the case that the lighting is just perfect for me to see the color. But there is no point of view that *I* could be in from which the full three-dimensional object would be fully revealed.

Nevertheless, the notion of an ideal point of view has a rich history. One traditional name for the ideal view on an object is the "view

from nowhere." Merleau-Ponty attributes to Leibniz the notion that the view from nowhere is ideal, saying that Leibniz believes it is this "geometrized projection (*géométral*) of . . . all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position" that most reveals an object as it really is. From the start, however, we have said that seeing is in its nature perspectival, and so Merleau-Ponty naturally rails against such a view: "But what do these words mean? Is not to see always to see from somewhere? To say that the house itself is seen from nowhere is surely to say that it is invisible!" (*PP* 81/67/77). The idea of a *view* from *nowhere*, in other words, is a contradiction.

It is a contradiction that is motivated by a genuine insight, however, for it is true, of course, that no single point of view reveals the object fully. When we add that each point of view nevertheless reveals something about the object, then the proper notion of an ideal or normal perspective becomes clear. It is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere all at once:

> Our previous formula must therefore be modified; the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden. (*PP* 83/69/79)

The view from *everywhere*, in other words, is the optimum perspective from which to view the object, the perspective from which one grips it maximally.[27]

It should be clear, as I have already emphasized, that the view from everywhere is not a view that *I* can have.[28] Although it is not itself achievable by me, the view from everywhere is nevertheless an ideal from which I can sense myself to be deviating. It is the *norm*, in other words, with respect to which all actual points of view are understood. In this way, the optimal view from everywhere plays the same kind of normative role that the other optimal phenomena do.

Understood in this fashion, it becomes clear why the background objects cannot be experienced as determinate things, for objects understood merely in terms of their determinate features cannot play the proper normative role. Merleau-Ponty's account, instead, is that the background objects are experienced as stand-ins for the point of view one gets on the focal thing from the position in which they sit. Although *I* can never stand everywhere at once, I can see all the

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objects surrounding my focal thing as together making up the view from everywhere. It is in this sense that I experience objects as seeing one another. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty suggests, to look at an object is just to see it as the spatial center of focus onto which all the objects surrounding it converge:

> To look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. (*PP* 82/68/79)

In this way, although the view from everywhere is not a view I myself can have, it is a view I can now see as *being* had, a view from which my own perspective is felt to deviate. To get a proper feel for this claim, we need to see better how different felt deviations from the norm affect my experience of the focal thing.

3. *The Normativity of Points of View*

Every point of view on an object that I can actually have is a deviation from the norm. If I could *per impossibile* take up the view from everywhere, it would give me a better grip on the object than any single point of view could. This is not to say that every point of view deviates equally from the norm; some points of view are better than others. Thus, to see the background objects in terms of their point of view is already to understand the background normatively.

To see that some points of view are better than others, it will help to consider a simple example. If I experience the object to be a flat façade, I will experience the points of view that look sideways on to it as the least revealing ones. Insofar as I am trying to get the best sense of the façade as a whole, I will immediately feel solicited to move around to see it from the front.[29] In general, depending on the shape I see the object to be, different perspectives on it will seem to be better or worse deviations from the norm. Indeed, just as with the relation between lighting and color, sensing that *here* is a better perspective from which to view the object is already sensing the object to be one thing rather than another.

Whether I sense a perspective on an object to be better or worse does not necessarily depend on *how much* of the object it reveals.

Rather, the better perspectives are the ones that reveal more of the object's *revealing* features. Suppose I have a coffee mug with a handle on it. The perspective from which the handle is completely hidden may be a less revealing perspective on the object than the one from which it is fully seen. This might be true even if I see more of the surface area of the object from the perspective in which the handle is hidden than I do from the perspective in which it is seen. Because the handle is a particularly revealing feature of the object, points of view from which it is seen are by their nature experienced as more revealing. It is an interesting empirical fact that we seem immediately to see certain features of objects as more revealing than others and that we seem immediately to prefer correlative perspectives on it.[30]

Although I emphasized, in the last section, an important difference between the view from everywhere and the optimal lighting context, it should be clear from the description I have just given that there are important similarities as well. In the first place, my experience of other points of view is normative in the way that my experience of other lighting contexts is: *that* point of view looks to me *better* than the one I have now; *that other* point of view looks to me *worse* than mine. Better points of view immediately solicit me to take them up, and worse points of view are immediately avoided. To say that I see other objects as having points of view on the focal thing is just to say that I am immediately solicited either to see or not to see what is now revealed from where those objects are.[31]

Furthermore, as with the relation between lighting and color, which points of view I see to be better and worse already determines what I see the object to be. We have seen this already with the case of object and façade discussed earlier, but it is true for the other spatial features of an object as well. To see the backside of the mug as having a handle, for example, is already to experience the point of view on the backside as a particularly revealing one. The spatial identity of the object, in other words, is guaranteed by my experience of the value of the various points of view that are now had on it. As Merleau-Ponty says, background

> objects recede into the periphery and become dormant, while, however, not ceasing to be there. Now with them I have at my disposal their horizons, in which there is implied, as a marginal view, the object on which my eyes at

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present fall. The horizon, then, is what guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration. (*PP* 82/68/78)

The relation between the spatial identity of an object and my experience of its spatial ground is the high point in Merleau-Ponty's account of seeing things. Unfortunately, it is at just this point that Merleau-Ponty falters. Let us see precisely how.

4. *The Identity of the Real, Constant Thing*

What exactly is the real, constant thing, and how is its identity bound up with the experience of the spatial ground? There is an easy way to misunderstand what Merleau-Ponty's view requires, and it is once again exemplified by Husserl's approach. Recall that for Husserl the hidden sides of an object are hypothesized but sensuously absent. This fact has repercussions for what Husserl understands the real object to be. In particular, it suggests that the real object is not the kind of thing that could be presented in *any* perspectival presentation. Because the real object actually has a hidden side, and because the hidden side of the object is never presented in experience, no experience of an object could possibly present it as it really is. Indeed, the problem is worse than that. There are literally an infinite number of possible presentations of the real object that are not now being given. For Husserl (as for phenomenalists such as C. I. Lewis), the real object is identified with the whole system of these perspectival presentations taken together – what Husserl sometimes calls the "nexus of appearances." Every "appearance refers, by virtue of its sense, to possibilities of fulfillment, to a continuous-unitary nexus of appearance, in which the sense would be accomplished in every respect, thus in which the determinations would come to 'complete' givenness."[32] Similarly, "[I]f we were to retain [a given] . . . appearance while cutting off the other multiplicities of appearances and the essential relations to them, none of the sense of the givenness of the physical thing would remain."[33] This system of perspectival presentations, which Husserl sometimes also calls the "circle of complete givenness,"[34] is the "real" object to which each perspectival presentation refers but which none by itself is able to present. It can be understood intellectually, although not presented perceptually, by imagining yourself walking around the object or by imagining it rotating before you.[35]

This cannot be Merleau-Ponty's view. The real object should not be defined as the sum of all the perspectives on it, for Merleau-Ponty, any more than the real color is defined as the color seen in the optimal lighting context. The view from everywhere, which is the optimal spatial context, is the view that would give me the *maximum grip* on the object (if I could have it). Even if I could have this view, however, it would not present the real thing as a determinate particular, any more than the optimal lighting context presents the real color determinately. Like the color, the real thing should be that which stands as the background to every particular presentation of it. It is the *norm* from which I experience the object as presented in my current perspective to be deviating. We must say about the real thing, in other words, what Merleau-Ponty has already said about the real color, namely, that it "persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a nonsensory [indeterminate] presence" (*PP* 352/305/356). In contrast with Husserl, therefore, Merleau-Ponty's account should hold that the real thing is present in *every* perspectival presentation of it, although, of course, it is never presented determinately in any one.

I believe that this is a crucial point. Indeed, it is the only way to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's important and interesting idea that the background is experienced normatively. It is the only way to make sense, in other words, of his central claim that we experience the perceptual context in terms of how it ought to change to see the object better. Everything he says leads him to this view. Yet, amazingly, I can find no place where he states it explicitly. He does make the important claim, as we saw earlier, that the identity of the object is guaranteed by the horizon of the points of view on it, but he never seems to state further that this horizon is the *norm* from which every perspective is felt to deviate. Indeed, there is no talk of a "tension that deviates round a norm" anywhere in the vicinity of this discussion. Worse yet, in some of his less formal work, he carelessly posits just the Husserlian view that he opposes – the view that the real thing is the *sum* of the points of view on it rather than the *norm* defined by the sum.[36]

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These lacunae in the text and lapses in the occasional pieces are troubling indeed. I cannot account for them except by the interpretive strategy with which we began. I have become convinced that what Merleau-Ponty does say – the overall sense and style of his view – points unequivocally in the direction of a position he was not able to articulate. In any case, I find this intended position extremely intriguing. After a brief summary of the dialectic so far, I conclude in the final section by distinguishing Merleau-Ponty's full phenomenological account of object perception from a more familiar position in its neighborhood.

V. SUMMARY BY WAY OF INTERLUDE

Let me summarize what I've said so far. We began with the phenomenological distinction between experiencing something as an object and experiencing it as a mere façade. The problem, addressed by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others, is to account for this distinction. Everyone agrees what the first move is: we must admit that when we experience something as a full-fledged three-dimensional object, there is some sense in which we experience it as having sides that are now hidden from view. Here, however, opinions begin to diverge.

One natural, but mistaken, idea is that our experience of the hidden side of an object is not a properly perceptual one. This is the approach that Husserl prefers. It is motivated by the intuition that perception begins with the presentation of determinate sense data; any putative aspect of perception that is not attributable to such a presentation is not properly part of perception at all. To the extent that we experience the object as having a hidden side, on Husserl's view, it is because we *hypothesize* the side's existence, not because we *perceive* it. The hidden side of the object is *indeterminate* in experience in the sense that we have not yet determined perceptually what its determinate features are.

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, says that we really do perceive the hidden side of the object. This is not because he believes we are presented with determinate sense data from it. Rather, it is because he believes that perceptual experience is not the presentation of sense data. The most basic unit of perceptual experience is the presentation of a figure against a ground. Sense data cannot make the figure–ground distinction. To account for this distinction, according to Merleau-Ponty, we need to admit that there is a positive but essentially indeterminate aspect of perception. The hidden side of the object is positively presented in experience, but it is presented indeterminately.

Merleau-Ponty's main challenge is to characterize the indeterminate aspect of perception. Perception is indeterminate, on his view, because it is essentially *normative*. Determinate sense data *describe* the world – they amount to a presentation of it feature by feature. When we perceive things, however, we are constantly sensitive not only to what we perceive but also, and essentially, to *how well* our experience measures up to our perceptual needs and desires. The norms involved in perception, therefore, are norms about how best to see the thing perceived.

The visual background is always experienced in terms of these norms: we do not see a determinate level of light, we see how the light needs to change to see the color better; we do not see a determinate object behind the figure, we see a point of view on the figure, a point of view that solicits us to take it up. Generally, our experience of the visual background is the experience of a tension around a norm. We can describe this mathematically as sensitivity to the direction and slope of the improvement curve.

The figure is also experienced normatively. This is because figure and ground are essentially intertwined. For every figure, there is an optimal context in which to see it: dark colors are best seen in brighter light, façades are best seen from the front, objects in general are always better seen from the perspective that best reveals their revealing features, and so on. Thus, the interplay between figure and ground is an essential feature in the identity of each. Which color I perceive to be in front of me is already anticipated by my immediate bodily inclination to look, say, at the more brightly lit areas of the surface to get a better view of it.

Finally, the real color or thing, the one that remains constant throughout various presentations, is itself experienced normatively. It persists beneath every particular presentation as a background persists beneath a figure. The real, constant color or thing, in other words, is experienced as that maximally articulate norm against

which every particular presentation is felt to deviate. Merleau-Ponty is clear about this in the case of color but falters in his discussion of the real, constant thing.

This final kind of normativity gives us the answer to our initial problem. On Merleau-Ponty's view, I experience an object as now having sides that are hidden from me because I experience it as now seen from everywhere. This view from everywhere is the norm against which my particular presentation is felt to deviate. It is the background against which my perspectival presentation makes sense. In the concluding section, I contrast Merleau-Ponty's account with the phenomenalist account found in the work of authors such as C. I. Lewis. I hope to make it clear not only what Merleau-Ponty *means* when he says that objects see one another, but also why this account of perception is *better* than all its competitors.

VI. PHENOMENOLOGY VERSUS PHENOMENALISM

We have seen how the view from everywhere is the optimal view on an object; we have seen also that this optimal view presents itself as the background against which every particular presentation makes sense. It might still be natural to ask, however, why we must say that objects *see* one another.[37] A fairly natural theory of perception, which is defended by phenomenalists such as C. I. Lewis, seems to allow for a view from everywhere without ungainly mention of objects that see. In this concluding section, I show why Merleau-Ponty's account is superior to the phenomenalist approach.

The phenomenalist account of perception, of which I give no more than a caricature here, is sensitive to the problem that Husserl emphasized: it wants to explain how I can experience something as a three-dimensional object despite only ever having perspectival presentations of it. To solve this problem, as we have seen, one must have something to say about the hidden sides of the experienced object. The phenomenalist approach depends on a counterfactual analysis: the experienced object is seen *thus* from the perspective I am in now, would be seen *thus* if I were over there, and would be seen *thus* if I were in that other place. The experienced object therefore, as a full-fledged, three-dimensional entity, comprises the sum of all the possible perspectives that I could have on it.

We have already seen one weakness with a view like this: as with Husserl's account, the real object is *never* seen. I would like to focus on another aspect of the phenomenalist view, however: its penchant for defining the experienced object in terms of a series of experiences that *I* can have. The problem with this approach is that from the perspective that I am in *now*, I cannot have these other determinate experiences. Yet I nevertheless experience the object as a three-dimensional thing. The way I *now* experience the hidden side of the object is simply not the way I *would* experience it if I were on the other side. I do not now have the point of view from the other side, so my experience of that side of the object is not now what it would be if I were over there.

Merleau-Ponty's approach is tailor-made to avoid this difficulty. According to Merleau-Ponty, I now have a positive presentation of the hidden side of the object, but it is not the same as the presentation of that side that I would have if I were looking directly at it. To say that I see the object standing behind my focal thing *as having a point of view on it*, is simply to say that I see the hidden side as now presented, but not as now presented *to me*. Still, it would be nice to understand this metaphor more clearly. Let me try to explain.

The crucial passage is one that we have considered already. In discussing the way I experience background objects while focusing on the figure, Merleau-Ponty writes,

> to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But insofar as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. (*PP* 82/68/79)

It is clear from this passage that the experience I now have of the hidden side of the object, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not the experience I would have if I were behind it. Rather, "I already perceive" the hidden side of the object because I am "potentially lodged in" the background object that now stands behind the figure. To understand the account fully, therefore, we must understand what it means *now* to be potentially lodged in another point of view.

The best way to understand this idea is by comparison with Merleau-Ponty's account of motor intentionality.[38] In skillful, unreflective coping activities, such as grasping a coffee mug to drink

from it, I have a direct bodily understanding of the shape, size, and weight of the mug. This direct bodily understanding is manifest in my body's unreflective tendency to form its grip with a certain shape and size and to prepare itself to lift an object of a certain weight. The tendency to perform these bodily preparations is more than merely a reflex because it is directed toward and responsive to the features of the mug. In this sense, we can call the activity intentional, but it is an essentially bodily understanding of those features and, indeed, can be had without any determinate visual experience of them at all.[39] For these reasons, Merleau-Ponty puts this kind of skillful coping activity into a new category that he calls "motor intentionality." Motor-intentional activity is reducible neither to any form of determinate cognitive intentionality nor to a series of merely reflexive movements. The motor-intentional understanding I have of the coffee mug in grasping it is a kind of bodily readiness for its relevant features.

This kind of full bodily readiness for something is what I believe Merleau-Ponty is pointing to when he says that I am now "potentially lodged in" the other points of view on the object. It is not a matter of now having a determinate experience of what is seen from those points of view, any more than the motor-intentional understanding of the mug is a matter of having a determinate visual experience of its features. Rather, it is a kind of bodily readiness to take up those points of view, a readiness that is reducible neither to a determinate cognitive understanding of what is seen in the view nor to a series of merely reflexive bodily movements. To see the coffee mug as now having a handle on its hidden side, for example, is to be prepared to pick it up from the back with a grip of a certain shape and size. To be potentially lodged in the point of view from behind the mug is now to be ready, in a direct bodily manner, to deal with the features of the mug that are now presented fully to the thing that is currently behind it.

This kind of bodily readiness for the features of an object, whether they are now hidden from view or not, is manifest throughout my interactions with the thing. So, for example, when directed to push her hand through an oriented slot, scientists have observed that a subject begins to rotate her hand in the appropriate direction as soon as it leaves the starting position.[40] For this reason Merleau-Ponty says about motor-intentional activities such as grasping that "from the outset the grasping movement is magically at its completion" (*PP* 120/103–4/119). It is in this sense that we should understand his further claim that, in being potentially lodged in other points of view, I "already perceive" what is seen from them. I already perceive the hidden side of the object in the sense that I am now ready, in a direct bodily manner, to deal with the features that are, I take it, now seen of it from behind. If I took the mug not to have a handle on the hidden side, then I would experience the point of view had by the object behind it differently. This difference would manifest itself in a different bodily readiness to deal with the hidden side of the mug.

The phenomenon of *now* experiencing the backside of the object a certain way is something the Lewisian phenomenalist cannot account for. Even so, it may still seem as though one could account for this phenomenon without any reference to seeing things. After all, in the version I have given so far, I have described the whole phenomenon in terms of bodily readiness. Even if this readiness is *motor* intentional, surely it is still *my* readiness, not one ascribed to other things.

This is a tricky point, but we have come across it already in section III.[41] Recall that we were trying to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's claim that lighting "leads" the gaze. I said that lighting leads the gaze in the sense that I have a direct bodily inclination to look where the lighting is best in order to see the color of a thing. This is a motor-intentional activity: my eyes move to a particular place on the object, but they do not identify that place in terms of its determinate features. Indeed, the inclination to move my eyes in a particular direction is so immediate and tied so directly to the lighting context that it may be misleading even to say that it is *my* inclination. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The lighting directs my gaze and causes me to see the object, so that in a sense it [the lighting] *knows* and *sees* the object" (*PP* 358/310/361).

We can say the same thing about the inclination to prepare my body in a particular way to deal with the hidden side of the coffee mug. In some sense it is *my* bodily readiness at stake. Yet how much credit can *I* take for this? Is it up to me alone that as soon as my hand leaves the starting position it begins to form an appropriate grip? I certainly did not know that my hand was doing that. Yet the activity is intentional from the start. It is directed toward and responsive to what my body takes to be the features of the hidden side of the mug.

As with the lighting, therefore, we must say that I experience my grip as *being led* to form itself in a certain way, led by something other than myself, something that knows more about the hidden features of the mug than I am capable of knowing from here. I have to say that objects see one another, in other words, to account for the motor intentionality of my activity, an intentionality that does not belong entirely to me.

The motivating idea here is that we experience our environment at least partly in terms of the activities it immediately leads us to perform. The environment solicits certain motor-intentional activities and suppresses others. As the ecological psychologist J. J. Gibson says, developing this view of Merleau-Ponty's, the perceived world is full of affordances to act, affordances that the involved perceiver responds to in an immediate and unreflective way.[42] When things are working well, these affordances in the environment lead us to act in ways that are consonant with it. I find myself forming a certain grip, through no determinate effort of my own, and lo and behold the grip forms perfectly to the hidden handle of the mug. Because the formation of the grip is so obviously intentional, and because it is equally obvious that I am not its principal cause, Merleau-Ponty puts the intentionality directly in the world.[43] Seeing things, in other words, requires seeing things.

VII. CONCLUSION

I said at the start that Merleau-Ponty's interpretive strategy both licenses and illustrates my account of his view. Now we should be able to understand why. Merleau-Ponty's account of object perception, like his account of the style of a thinker's thought, depends on the possibility that something can at once be closest to me and farthest away. In the case of object perception, motor-intentional solicitations are so hidden from me that I do not experience myself as their proximal cause. Indeed, a full account of the phenomenology of object perception requires me to say that I experience the world and its objects as intentional. Yet what could be closer to me than the way I hold my body in preparing to perform a task? So, too, the overall style of a thinker's thought guides and directs him as if from afar. Just as the subject's hand moves immediately and unreflectively to the coffee mug, so too the philosopher knows intuitively what must be

said. His thought is guided by something outside himself to which he is responsible, something that knows his subject better than he. The style of a thinker's thought, in other words, illustrates the normative dimension of the figure–ground experience.

Yet Merleau-Ponty's approach licenses my interpretation as well, for I have argued that he misunderstands a crucial feature of his own view; this is precisely the kind of thing that Merleau-Ponty's interpretive strategy leads us to expect is possible. Because the style of a thinker's thought is hidden from him, "what is given to him with his style is not a certain number of ideas or tics that he can inventory but a manner of formulation that is just as recognizable for others and just as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures" (*PM* 82/58). We have seen that it takes a scientist or a very subtle phenomenologist to observe certain crucial features of a subject's motor-intentional activity. That the subject's hand moves in the appropriate direction as soon as it leaves the starting position, for example, is often a surprise to the subject himself. So, too, with the details of an author's view. Although the style pushes him to say certain things and not others, the details that his position requires are often difficult for him to identify. In the résumé for a course he taught at the Collège de France in 1959 and 1960, Merleau-Ponty makes this point explicitly. In this passage, with which I will conclude, Merleau-Ponty is discussing the assumption that only an "objective" method of interpretation – one that says "just what was said or directly implied" by the thinker – would give us the proper account of his thought:

> Such an assumption would only be plausible if [a philosopher's] thought... were simply a system of neatly defined concepts, of arguments responding to perennial problems, and of conclusions which permanently solve the problems. But what if the meditation changes the sense of the concepts it employs and even the sense of the problems; what if its conclusions are merely the results of a progression which was transformed into a "work" by the interruption – an interruption which is always premature – of a life's work? Then we could not define a philosopher's thought solely in terms of what he had achieved; we would have to take account of what until the very end his thought was trying to think. Naturally, words, which delimit and circumscribe it, must attest to this unthought. But then these words must be understood through their lateral implications as much as through their manifest or frontal meaning. (*HLP* 5)[44]

NOTES

1. Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 71.
2. There is very little discussion in the secondary literature of this difficult but extremely important passage. There is no discussion that I know of that is at all helpful.
3. Three other points are subsidiary to the phenomenology but worth mentioning anyway. First, the thing I'm looking at need not *be* a façade for me to experience it as one. When I leave the set, for instance, and I'm walking down the street of a real town, I can experience its buildings as façades even if they're not. Again, with enough exploration – opening the door to the bank and seeing a real bank inside, for instance – I will come to see these buildings as the real thing. But whether they are real buildings is not conclusive in determining whether I will experience them to be so. Second, my *knowledge* that something is a façade or a real building is neither necessary nor sufficient for me to experience it as such. I knew the structures on the movie set were façades when I first walked in, but that didn't make me experience them as façades; only exploring them had that effect. So knowing that something is a façade is not sufficient for experiencing it as one; we can be fooled. Likewise, knowing that something is a façade is not necessary for experiencing it as one. Indeed, when I walk through the real town after visiting the movie set, I might know that the structures I'm looking at are *not* façades, even though I can't help experiencing them that way. Finally, and related to this, seeing something *as* a façade or seeing it *as* a full three-dimensional entity is not just *consciously* giving a particular interpretation to otherwise neutral sense data. We have already seen that nothing I *know* about the scene guarantees that I will experience it one way or another. More generally, however, it is important to point out that gestalt shifts between object and façade, like gestalt shifts generally, are not under the conscious control of the subject at all. The subject is *given* an already formulated take on the world; he does not *impose* it. It is this fact that Merleau-Ponty hopes to explain by claiming that I experience objects as seeing one another.
4. Husserl called these sense data the *hulê* – literally, the matter – of sensation. There is much dispute about what Husserl took the *hulê* to be. A rough approximation regards them as akin to sense data as Russell understood these in *The Problems of Philosophy*, although this is no doubt false in detail. In any event, for the purposes of this discussion it suffices to know that the perceiver has *hulê* for the front of a perceived object but not for its back.
5. I regard this essay, in part, as a development of positions I gestured at in §3 of "The Non-Conceptual Content of Perceptual Experience."

6. See my "Husserl and Phenomenology."
7. Husserl, *Thing and Space*, 57.
8. *Thing and Space*, 55.
9. It is worth commenting that the visual background is an absolutely pervasive aspect of experience. This is because, as the Gestalt psychologists clearly recognized, the most basic kind of experience is that of a figure against a ground. This Gestalt psychological principle was at the very foundation of Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception. See *PP* 10/4/4.
10. There are obviously a large number of contextual features that make some contribution to my experience of an object or its properties. These include, for example, the lighting context, the distance to the object, the orientation of the object, and so on. In Husserl's discussion of these issues, it is not always clear which contextual features he has in mind.
11. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, esp. Investigation V, §2: 538. The importance of the notion of *Abschattungen* has been noticed in the Husserl literature, but I do not believe it has been given enough attention. One difficulty is that the various English translations of Husserl's texts render this term differently. In the passage quoted earlier, for instance, Findlay uses the phrase "projective differences," whereas the Kersten translation of *Ideas I* systematically employs the preferable term "adumbration." See Husserl, *Ideas I*, 70. Husserl himself sometimes uses other phrases for this phenomenon as well. In the text leading up to the passage quoted earlier, for example, he uses the phrase "the appearance of the object's coloring" to characterize the *Abschattungen*. See *Logical Investigations*, Investigation V, §2: 537. See my "Husserl and Phenomenology" for a more extended discussion of the role this concept plays in Husserl's work.
12. Recall that for Husserl a perceptual feature of an object or property is indeterminate if my experience has not yet determined what it is. In this case, the feature is hypothesized but sensously absent.
13. See Mulligan, "Perception," especially §6.1 for some discussion of Husserl on the phenomena of perceptual constancy.
14. See Rock, *Indirect Perception*.
15. It can be misleading to say that you "know" where to move your eyes. Whatever this "knowledge" consists in, it is certainly not articulated conceptual knowledge about the interplay of color and light. Rather, the knowledge is of a direct and bodily sort. When confronted with the task of determining the color of the table, you have a direct bodily inclination to move your eyes in one direction rather than another. This inclination is so immediate and tied so directly to the lighting context, that it may be misleading even to say that it is *your* inclination. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The lighting directs my gaze and causes me to see

the object, so that in a sense it [the lighting] *knows* and *sees* the object" (*PP* 358/310/361). In his later work, Merleau-Ponty suggests that it is not possible to say whether the subject or the environment is in command: "The look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of preestablished harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not desultory – I do not look at a chaos, but at things – so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command" (*VI* 175/133). In any event, if it is *my* knowledge about where to move my eyes, this "knowledge" is of an extremely unusual kind. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty gives the name "motor intentionality" to our direct bodily inclination to act in a situated, environmental context. See my "Logic of Motor Intentional Activity" for an account of some of the striking logical features of this kind of intentionality.

16. The treatment of distance and perspective is exactly analogous. I experience the distance to the object (when I am within the range of the size-constancy effect) in terms of how well it allows me to see the object's size. I do not experience the distance as a determinate, measurable amount. Indeed, many people are astoundingly bad at judging distances, but the distance to the object is always part of my experience of it nevertheless. The distance figures in my experience in a normative way: I *ought to get closer* to see the object *better*, or I *ought to move back* to take it in. Needless to say, these are not conscious judgments but immediately felt bodily inclinations to act. So, too, with perspective. I experience the perspective I have on the object in terms of how well it allows me to see the object's shape. Of course, there are many other contextual features as well.
17. Merleau-Ponty is describing the way I experience the distance to an object in this passage, but the same point holds for the way I experience the lighting context. I experience it not as a measurable quantity of brightness, but instead in terms of how well it allows me to see the thing I am drawn to see.
18. My doubts stem principally from the particular statement of the claim here. I suspect that what the lighting norm is in a given situation can depend on an indefinite array of situational features. Here I have listed only three – the subject, the day, and the shade in question – and so it seems likely that this statement of the claim is false. It seems to me likely, for example, that the lighting norm will change also depending on what the object is that manifests the color, how far away the subject is standing from the object, what direction the lighting comes from, what the color of the light is, perhaps the subject's emotional state, and so on. I suspect it will be difficult ever to determine what all the relevant situational features are.
19. Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty is not completely consistent about this crucial point. He says, for instance, mistakenly, "I run through appearances and reach the real color or the real shape when my experience is at its maximum of clarity" (*PP* 367/318/371). This amounts to the claim that the real color is the color presented focally when the lighting context is best. This claim contradicts the more interesting and important idea that the real color is seen as the *background* to every contextual presentation of it, even the presentation that is maximally clear.
20. See, for example, Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, esp. §19, and *Experience and Judgment*, esp. §8.
21. Husserl, *Thing and Space*, 80.
22. *Thing and Space*, 81.
23. See the chapter in *Phenomenology of Perception* titled "'Attention' and 'Judgment.'"
24. Notice that there will be different norms for different purposes. I am describing here only the norm for seeing something as a full three-dimensional entity.
25. It should be obvious by now that the "normal" context is not the one I am normally or usually in. Rather, it is the context that serves as the standard or norm by which all other relations are measured; it is the norm with respect to which all other views are felt to deviate.
26. Recall that this is a bit tricky. Although the current lighting context could in fact be the one that gives me the best view of the color (perhaps), it could not be the one that is the *norm*. The norm is that from which any given context is felt to be deviating – it is where the lighting *should* be and is therefore defined by its normative pull. Even if the actual lighting context is perfect, it still stands somewhere in relation to where it *should* be. (See section III of this chapter.)
27. There is an interesting question about the scope of "everywhere," as Mark Alfano has emphasized to me. If it is the *perceived* object that we're talking about, the real object *as it is perceived*, then the view from everywhere must really be the view from all the *normal perceptual* perspectives one can take on an object. This would not include, for example, the electron microscope view from within the bowels of the plumbing. Merleau-Ponty is not always very clear about this, even in the quote I included earlier. I believe that when he is emphasizing the infinity of possible views on the object, he is pushing in the direction of a constructivist ontology that is at odds with his actual view, but I will not pursue the point here.

28. If it were, then the object of perception would have a kind of cubist presentation in which every side of it is presented simultaneously *to me* in my single point of view. See "Husserl and Phenomenology," where I argue that Brentano's account of intentionality, when applied to perception, unintentionally yields this bizarre understanding of the object as perceived.
29. Naturally, what perspective I sense to be the best will depend on my perceptual needs and desires. If I am trying to figure out whether *it is* a façade, for example, the sideways on view may be the *most* revealing. If I already see it as a façade, however, I will sense that there is more to be gained from the front.
30. Recent empirical work has shown that there are preferential views even for objects never seen before. In one study, when subjects were allowed actively to explore new objects, they "spent most of their time studying only four views of the objects, all of which were rotations about the vertical axis. These four views corresponded to the front, back and two side views of the objects. Subjects tended to spend very little time studying particular intermediate views between these angles." It is interesting to discover that, as these authors argue, some views are seen immediately as better than others, even for objects I have never seen before. It is even more interesting, as they further suggest, that the better views cluster around what the subject immediately takes to be the vertical axis of the object. Not only are some perspectives on the object immediately experienced as more revealing, but, moreover, this is because one side of the object is immediately experienced as its base. As the authors write, subjects "treated the flat surface of the object as the 'bottom' and generally kept the objects oriented so that this surface was always face down." The normative aspect of object perception, in other words, seems to be part of our perceptual experience of objects even from our very first interactions with them. See Harman, Humphrey, and Goodale, "Active Manual Control of Object Views Facilitates Visual Recognition."
31. It is worth pointing out in this context, however, one possible dissimilarity with the lighting case that arises from our discussion in section IV.2. That is, which points of view seem to me more revealing of an object can change as I have further experience with it. This *can* happen in the case of lighting and color, but it is not normal. It can happen, for example, when my experience of the color shifts dramatically upon seeing that the lighting has been tricking me. In that case, which lighting contexts I experience as better and worse can change as well. This is not the normal case, however, once we are within the bounds of the constancy effect, familiarity with the color does not change my experience of it. (One possible exception to this is found in the case of master painters like Cézanne and Van Gogh, who may come to have different bodily anticipations for colors as they perfect their art. Let us leave this case aside.) By contrast, I will certainly experience the hidden features of a new object differently as I become more familiar with them. As I explore the object, I will come to have fuller and fuller bodily anticipations about what I will see on the other side. This is an important fact about object perception. I relegate this fact to a footnote, however, because it is somewhat to the side of my purposes here. For no matter how familiar I am with an object, my bodily anticipations will never reveal to me explicitly its hidden features in the way they are now revealed to the point of view on it from behind. For that reason, I will always experience other points of view on the object in terms of how they solicit me to take them up. This similarity between the normativity of the lighting context and the normativity of the spatial background is what I wish to emphasize.

32. Husserl, *Thing and Space*, 124.
33. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 82.
34. *Thing and Space*, 129.
35. See *Thing and Space*, 127. For Merleau-Ponty's criticism of this view, which he calls Kantian and intellectualist, see *PP* 347–8/301–2/351.
36. In one discussion piece, for instance, he writes, "in perception [the thing] is 'real'; it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views" (*PrP* 48/15).
37. This is, of course, shorthand for the more careful statement of Merleau-Ponty's view. The claim is not that objects *do* see one another, but rather that *we experience* objects as seeing one another.
38. See my "Logic of Motor Intentional Activity" for a fuller account of this notion.
39. The recent work by Mel Goodale and David Milner with a patient known as D. F. shows this clearly. Because of a brain lesion, D. F. has a condition known as visual form agnosia – she cannot see the shapes of things. Nevertheless, she is capable of acting differentially with respect to those shapes, and indeed of doing things like grasping coffee mugs. See Milner and Goodale, *The Visual Brain in Action*.
40. See *The Visual Brain in Action*, 128.
41. See note 15.
42. See chapter 8 of Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.
43. At least he does so some of the time. In his later work, he comes more strongly to emphasize that the knowledge about how to act in motor intentional situations belongs neither completely in the subject nor completely in the thing (see note 15). For this reason, he creates a new ontological category – the flesh (*la chair*) – that is neither subject nor

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object, neither perceiver nor perceived, but an essential intertwining of the two. It is interesting to note that even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sometimes flirts with a view like this. So, for instance, he writes, "The subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting that is changed by it; it is a power that is born into and simultaneously with a certain existential environment.... Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes... an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God... in the same way the sensible... is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body... so that sensation is literally a form of communion" (*PP* 245–6/211–12/245–6).

44. In developing these ideas I owe several important debts of gratitude. Thanks go in the first place to Hubert Dreyfus, who recommended the epigraph and with whom I had many fruitful discussions on the topic of the paper more generally. Thanks also to Taylor Carman for several helpful comments, and to Cheryl Kelly Chen for that and so much more.

MARK A. WRATHALL

4 Motives, Reasons, and Causes

A measure of the remarkable influence of Cartesian dualism is found in the fact that it often constrains even the ways in which it is rejected. Few accept, it is true, the basic picture of a dualism of mental and physical *substances*. A dualism still shapes the philosophy of mind, however – for instance, in that almost everyone sees as central the task of figuring out the relation between mind and body. It sometimes seems as if the only possible accounts of human beings consist in either giving a mental or a physical description, or explaining how the mental descriptions and the physical descriptions relate to one another.

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, argues that no such variation, played out on the Cartesian register, will ever account for the human mode of being in the world. "There are two classical views," he notes;

> one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an acosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him.

For Merleau-Ponty, "neither view is satisfactory" (*SNS* 88–9/71–2); any adequate account of human existence will need recourse to a mode of explanation that is neither causal nor rational, and it will need to see the content of human states as neither physiological nor logical. Merleau-Ponty argues that the model for understanding human being can be neither that of the inferential and justificatory relations of explicit thought nor that of the blind and mechanistic workings of material causality. Instead, he proposes that the paradigm

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