

Preface for “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty”

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The paper you will be reading for the session on March 23rd is one I wrote recently called “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty.” It is about the perception of objects and their properties, and in particular it is about Merleau-Ponty’s views on this topic. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) offered, in my estimation, some of the most profound and insightful observations ever made about the basic phenomenological features of perceptual experience. Since his work is not much studied by analytic philosophers, however, I thought this short preface to the paper might be in order. I will try to say a few things here to help you focus on what I think of as the main substantive issues in the paper, and will put them in the context of some recent work in analytic philosophy of mind. “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty” was written for, and will appear shortly in, the *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*.

1. Perceptual Constancy and the Perception of Object Properties

One of the main topics of the paper is the perception of object properties. Object properties are properties that we see objects to have, properties such as color, shape, and size. Psychologists have known since at least the time of Hering and Helmholtz in the mid 19th century that our perception of object properties admits of a phenomenon called perceptual constancy. Generally this is the phenomenon according to which we experience objects to have constant properties throughout variations in presentational context. Take the case of color constancy, for example. What color an object looks to be remains the same despite variations in the lighting context. This is a somewhat surprising fact. You might have thought that the color I see an object to be is directly correlated with the wavelength of the light reflected off the object onto my retina. As the light surrounding the object gets brighter or dimmer, however, the wavelength of the light reflected off the object onto my retina changes. Even so, the color the object looks to be remains the same. Merleau-Ponty thinks of color constancy as an essential fact about our experience of object colors, and I think he is onto something very important here.

The phenomenon of color constancy has limits, of course. If it’s completely dark then the object won’t look to be any color, since I won’t see the object in the first place. Also, when the lighting is very poor it can be difficult to see what color an object is, even if I can see the object. And there are in addition plenty of interesting illusions in which,

because of misleading shadow cues for instance, an object looks to be a color that it isn't. But the phenomenon of color constancy is a phenomenon that obtains when things are going pretty much right – which is to say, most of the time. When the variations in the surrounding light are within a certain range it does look like the color of the object remains the same. Furthermore, it seems obvious why there would have been evolutionary pressure for our perceptual systems to develop this way. If the color of the berry is an indication of whether it's poisonous or nutritious, then it would be disastrous if the color it looked to be changed every time the sun went behind the clouds.

Just as with color constancy, we experience the phenomena of size constancy and shape constancy too. When I walk towards you along the sidewalk, for example, it doesn't look like you are getting bigger. You look to be the same size. And this is true even though the size of the image that your body casts onto my retina changes with every step I take. Likewise, as the angle of presentation of an object changes the object nevertheless looks to be the same shape. In the standard example a penny presented at an angle casts an elliptical image onto the retina. Nevertheless the penny still looks to be round.

Just as with color, in the case of both size and shape constancy, of course, there are limits to how radically one can change the contextual features (distance to the object, angle of presentation) and maintain the constancy phenomena. When I see the cars from up in an airplane they look like little ants – size constancy has broken down. And when I see someone's face upside-down it doesn't even look like a face – shape constancy has broken down.¹ But again, in everyday contexts, which is to say most of the time, the phenomena of size and shape constancy obtain.

There are various explanations of how we perceivers manage the trick of perceptual constancy. One finds these explanations in both the philosophical and the scientific literature. One important fact about Merleau-Ponty's project, however, is that he is not interested in explaining the phenomenon at all. Rather, he is interesting simply in describing it as completely and accurately as possible. His general view, as a phenomenologist, is that describing the phenomena of perceptual experience is the hardest and most important project in any account of perception.

¹ It is too much of a simplification to think of faces merely as shapes, but you get the idea. If you're worried about the complications brought in by face perception we can use Chris Peacocke's favorite example here, the case of a square which, when tilted 45 degrees looks to be a regular diamond. Peacocke was probably the first and most influential analytic philosopher to highlight the importance of perceptual constancies. He seems to me very sensitive to many of the subtleties involved in the phenomenon, and I am fairly certain he doesn't make the mistake I will attribute to Alva Noë and Sydney Shoemaker in the next section. Even so, he does not assign the kind of bodily normativity to perceptual experience that Merleau-Ponty does, and that seems to me essential to the phenomena of constancy. I don't know if he will be sympathetic to this aspect of the account or not.

One reason it is so hard to describe experience is that by far the vast preponderance of our perceptual experiences are the ones we're having when we're not paying attention to the fact that we're having them. I look at the berry in order to see what color it is. I don't at the same time pay attention to what it's like for me to be experiencing it that way. (That would be a sure-fire way to get eaten by the tiger.) Since we do have to pay attention to our experiences in order to describe them, however, it is very difficult to describe the vast preponderance of our experiential life. One temptation, of course, is just to assume that whatever we find when we reflect on our experiences is what was there all along when we weren't reflecting on them. But this is an obvious mistake. It is like assuming that since the refrigerator light is on every time I look, it must be on when I'm not looking as well. This Refrigerator Light Hypothesis seems to be a working assumption of some of the analytic philosophers who have thought about perceptual constancy.

In the following sections I will motivate Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomena of perceptual constancy by contrasting it with some of these recent analytic accounts. The first three sections of the target paper present a detailed reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's account of this phenomenon.

2. Properties an Object Looks to Have and the Ways Those Properties Look

There are some people who reject the phenomenon of perceptual constancy altogether. Russell, for instance, at least at one point in his career, claimed that I believe the table to be a constant color throughout variations in lighting, but I don't see it that way.² This seems to me a non-starter. An object can look to have a uniform color even if I believe all sorts of strange things about it; even, for instance, if I believe that it is not a uniform color. The way an object looks, therefore, is not susceptible to rational revision in the way that my beliefs about an object are. So its looking to be a uniform color throughout variation in lighting cannot be explained as my believing that it is. Russell was driven to this view by his untenably restrictive sense-datum theory of perception.

Among the people who accept the phenomenon of perceptual constancy, some believe that memory plays an essential role. A 19th century empiricist account due to Ewald Hering, for instance, tries to run this line. Hering's idea is that I see the object to be a constant color even in poor lighting conditions because when the lighting is poor I replace my current experience of the object's color with the experience of it I remember having had in optimal lighting conditions. This account fails in a slightly more interesting way than Russell's. The problem here is that my experience of the color in optimal lighting conditions is not the same as my experience of it in poor lighting conditions. Even though I see the object to be the same color in the two lighting

² See The Problems of Philosophy.

conditions, the way that color looks is different when the lighting is good than when it is poor.³

Sophisticated accounts of perceptual constancy start with this distinction. They admit that an object can look to be the same with respect to size, shape or color even though the way the size, shape or color of the object looks is different in different circumstances. The man who is 50 feet away looks to be the same height as he approaches, but the way that height looks changes as he comes closer. The penny looks to be the same shape as it tilts away from me, but the way that shape looks is different as its angle changes. This distinction between properties and ways is essential to the account of perceptual constancy that both Alva Noë and Sydney Shoemaker have given recently.⁴ It is also at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's account. What distinguishes these accounts is how we characterize the ways that object properties have of looking.

Shoemaker and Noë are both fairly clear about what they mean when they talk about the way an object property looks. Take the case of color. The way a color looks, according to both Noë and Shoemaker, is due irreducibly to the combination of the color that it is and the lighting context in which it is presented. As Shoemaker says, "the way a light brown object in shadow looks [may] be the same as the way a dark brown object not in shadow looks." (p. 21). The way a color looks, in other words, is that qualitative whatnot that is shared in experiences of these two color-lighting pairs.⁵ On such an account a whole continuum of color-lighting pairs will give rise to an equivalence class of presentations that have the same qualitative character. This equivalence class will define what it is for a color to look a certain way.

Noë and Shoemaker would tell just the same story for shape and size. The way the penny at an angle looks is the same as the way an elliptical object looks face on. These objects do not look to be the same shape, since the penny looks to be round and the other object looks to be elliptical. But the way the shape of the penny looks is the same as the way the shape of the elliptical object looks. As to size, two lampposts at different distances may look to be the same height. But the way that height looks is different in the two cases. The closer lamppost looks the way a 10 foot tall object looks at 20 feet

³ Merleau-Ponty criticizes Hering's account on these grounds in Phenomenology of Perception.

⁴ See Noë's forthcoming book and his paper "Experience without the Head," forthcoming in Hawthorne and Gendler (eds.) Perceptual Experience (Oxford: OUP). See Shoemaker's unpublished paper "On the Way Things Appear." (I believe this paper is also slated for the Hawthorne and Gendler volume, but I'm not sure.)

⁵ I am leaving aside the metaphysical issue of whether ways are themselves properties that objects have, features that colors have, or properties that experiences of colors have. (Mutatis mutandis for size and shape.) This metaphysical issue is central to Shoemaker's recent work, but it is irrelevant to the phenomenological issue at hand. Similarly, I am using the phrase "qualitative character" in a metaphysically neutral way. The qualitative character of an experience is just what we are describing when we characterize its phenomenological features.

whereas the further lamppost looks the way a 5 foot tall object looks at 20 feet. And so on.

Ways that object properties have of looking, as characterized here, have been discussed under different names before. In the case of sizes and shapes, for instance, they are akin to what Chris Peacocke talks about under the heading of scenario content. Scenario content, according to Peacocke, is a “way of filling out the space around you;” the penny at an angle is meant to fill out the same space as the elliptical object face on. Indeed, the sense-datum theorists were describing exactly this aspect of the phenomenology as well. The penny at an angle gives rise to an elliptical-shaped sense-datum according to them. I don’t mean to be saddling either Noë or Shoemaker with anything like a sense-datum view, since the metaphysics and the epistemology of their views are radically unlike those of the sense-datum theorists. But it may help to understand what they mean when they talk of ways to think of the sense-datum phenomenology.

As I have said already, Merleau-Ponty thinks (and I agree with him) that it is extremely important to have room in your story both for the size, say, that an object looks to be and the way that size looks given the perceived distance to the object. But he thinks it is wrong (and I agree) to understand ways as Shoemaker and Noë have. I will explain why in the next section.

3. The Engaged and the Detached Perceptual Attitudes

You might think that what’s wrong with the Noë and Shoemaker account is that it depends upon a kind of sense-datum phenomenology, and in the end I think that this is an important part of the problem. But we have to be very careful here. There is, after all, something right about the sense-datum phenomenology; those sense-datum theorists didn’t just make it up out of whole cloth. There really is a perceptual attitude one can adopt in which the tilted penny looks the way an elliptical object looks face on. The question is whether this is the way the tilted penny looks when I am experiencing it to be circular. It is very hard to imagine that my experience should represent both these features simultaneously, that it should represent the penny both as looking like an ellipse and as looking circular. Both Noë and Shoemaker, however, are committed to the paradoxical view that this is the way things always look.

Noë is most explicit about the paradoxical quality of this claim. Indeed, in his forthcoming book he calls this “The Paradox of Perception,” and one of the central claims of the book is that this paradox lies at the heart of all perceptual experience. The paradox is that the grass can both look to be green and at the same time look yellow, the man at a distance can both look small and look to be big simultaneously, the penny can both look to be circular and look elliptical, and so on. Every experience represents both the property and the way the property looks. Shoemaker, too, is committed to this view. Although the metaphysics of his position has changed recently, he still thinks that every experience represents both the property and the way.

I think that this is bad phenomenology. I admit, as I have said already, that there is an attitude we can adopt in which we pay attention to the way the color or size or shape of an object looks (as Noë and Shoemaker understand this). But I deny that we can adopt this attitude while seeing an object to remain constant throughout contextual variation. To see this let me distinguish two perceptual attitudes, which I shall call the detached and the engaged perceptual attitudes.

In order to attend to the similarities between a tilted penny and an elliptical object face on I have to adopt the detached attitude. This is not a natural attitude, not the attitude we find ourselves in throughout the course of our everyday experiences, and it is in fact quite a feat to be able to adopt it at all. I cannot get my dog to adopt the detached attitude, for example. To him the tilted penny and the elliptical object face on share nothing in common (unless I have accidentally rubbed them both in barbeque sauce). But we humans have somehow learned to adopt this attitude. I'm not sure how it happened or whether there are any other animals that can do it. I wouldn't be surprised, though, if our own capacity to adopt the detached attitude is as little as 600 or so years old, dating back to the discovery of the laws of perspective. Learning to paint realistically, after all, requires learning to adopt the detached perceptual attitude.

The most important feature of the detached attitude for our purposes is that it requires the perceiver to prescind from his perceptual commitments about the way the world is in order to attend to the way it appears. Indeed, it seems to me virtually impossible both to attend perceptually to the similarity between the ellipse and the tilted penny and at the same time to see the tilted penny as being circular. On Noë and Shoemaker's view not only is this not impossible, this is the way experience always is.

In contrast to the detached attitude, consider the engaged attitude. This is something like our default attitude, and so it is probably wrong to speak of "adopting" this attitude. We are already engaged with the world in most of our everyday experiences. The engaged attitude is the perceptual attitude we are in when we are focused on the world instead of on our experiences of it. The engaged attitude is the natural home of the constancy phenomena. When I walk around the dinner table setting the places, the shape of the table remains stable in my experience; when I dim the lights for a romantic evening the color of the walls does not seem to change; when I am approaching a friend on campus he doesn't seem to grow. I could decide to adopt the detached attitude in the middle of any of these experiences, of course, and then I could pay attention to the Shoemakerian way the properties look. But this requires a shift in attention, a shift in attitude, that is almost as extreme as the gestalt shift required to go from duck to rabbit. I can switch back and forth between these attitudes, but I can't adopt them both at once. Or at any rate, even if I can adopt them both at once, it is very hard to do. According to Noë and Shoemaker, by contrast, we are always in both the detached and engaged attitudes simultaneously.

The temptation to claim that engaged experience always involves a representation of the way the property looks, in Shoemaker and Noë's detached sense, is therefore a

mistake. But it is easy to see how one makes the mistake. It is extremely difficult to describe our everyday engaged experiences since they are the experiences we have when we're not paying attention to the fact that we're having experiences. Indeed, when we reflect on our experiences, when we step back from their perceptual commitments in order to pay attention to the experiences themselves, we do something very much like entering the detached attitude. When we look at our experiences, in other words, we almost necessarily find the detached ways instead of the constant properties. Shoemaker himself recognizes this implicitly when he says, "asked to attend to one's perceptual experience of color, all one can do is attend to the way something appears with respect to color."⁶ But to conclude from this that the way is represented in the engaged experience too is to appeal to the Refrigerator Light Hypothesis. This is not, I submit, a viable methodology.

4. Conclusion

The problem with Noë and Shoemaker's account is not that we are never in the detached attitude, and so never experience the way a property looks in their sense. The problem is rather that the phenomena of perceptual constancy occur in the everyday, engaged attitude, and in this attitude the way an object property looks is not the same as the way it looks in the detached attitude. Even so, the distinction between the color an object looks to be and the way that color looks is an important distinction, and it is one that applies to our everyday, engaged perceptual experiences. The question is how adequately to account for this distinction. In "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty" I attempt to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty's answer to just this question.

I will not tell you the answer in this preface except to say this. The way the color or shape or size of an object looks can only vary with context if we are perceptually sensitive to the relevant contextual features. To say that in the engaged attitude the way you look with respect to size is different if you are 50 feet away than if you are 5 feet away just is to say that in the engaged attitude I take into account, in some way or another, the distance to you when representing your size. Merleau-Ponty's account depends on an analysis of the way in which we take these contextual features into account in our engaged experiences. The story involves an essentially bodily kind of normativity, a whole bodily sense that you are, for instance, too far away for me to see well how big you are. To find out the details of this bodily kind of normativity, you will have to look at the longer piece.

Some of you will have noticed that although I said at the beginning the paper is about the perception of objects and their properties, I have only talked here about the properties side of the story. Indeed, in the paper the whole second half (§§4-6) focuses on the perception of objects as full three-dimensional entities. Many of the issues there parallel the issues that arise in the discussion of color, size, and shape constancy. But the

⁶ p. 25

story is much more complicated. I won't even attempt to summarize it here, though I look forward to discussing it on the 23rd.