

Perception as the Upsurge of a World

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SYNOPSIS

'Nothing', says Merleau-Ponty, 'is more difficult than to know precisely what we see' (PhP, 1986 edn: 58).¹ Poets, playwrights and painters know precisely what they see, which is why they upset so many people and have to be locked up. Perception, for most people – looking out the window and seeing the road all wet from last night's rain – is so unremarkable as to be unnoticeable. Well, Merleau-Ponty called the act of perception a 'miracle', and spent his whole life wondering at it. This article is about that astonishing thing that we do all the time, which is right in our faces, yet which we hardly notice at all. No wonder so many of us die from boredom!

The 'Miracle' that is Perception

Everybody knows what perception is. It goes without saying. But then when you try to explain it, this most common experience of our lives becomes all shy and recedes into obscurity. Merleau-Ponty calls perception 'a miracle' (PhP: 391; F448). For him, the act of perception is the gathering about me of a world – a meaningful totality – which comes up to meet me like a great ocean tide. The 'miracle' is that it all adds up and makes sense. It is, for him, far more than just an 'inspection of the mind', like doing a tour of a gigantic supermarket, and he says that *the high point of human expression is 'singing the world'* (PhP: 187; F218).

Imprisoned by a Picture

This article is an invitation to reflect upon the 'miracle' that is our act of perception and to wake up and wonder at the world. We ask ourselves if, perhaps, we have already bought into an impoverished view of perception. If perhaps we see perception as a gradual build-up, like building a house from brick laid upon brick, like in the Gestalt cycle of Experience (Sills, Fish and Lapworth, 1995: 48–52); or perhaps our perception, instead of being a state of consciousness, has become habitually 'consciousness of a state' (PhP: 208; F241), so that instead of the world jumping up and greeting us face to face, the world becomes the correlative of 'thought about the world'. Charles Taylor heads an article on perception with a quotation from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'I am imprisoned by a picture' (Taylor, 2005: 26). The picture in question is a view of perception as the outcome of a 'stimulus/response' process. This always denies the *immediacy* of perception because it misses the subject by seeing him/her as just another 'thing in the world.'

The Kantian view is still around: '...true reality is and will forever remain, both unknown and unknowable to us' (Spinelli, 1989: 2); so in this view, when I am talking with you, the impression that I am in immediate contact with you is an illusion! What I am really in contact with is my mental construct of you! This is the Representational Theory of Perception (Hass, 2008: 12ff). Many philosophers and therapists take this view, but when challenged some deny it (Kennedy, 2001: 124). They say: to avoid error, the body must be kept safely locked up in the bedroom of immanence; the transcendent is kept at a distance and is known only through clear and distinct concepts like in mathematics. That way, error is avoided: 'Thus, the philosopher may speak with absolute assurance but not about the world' (Dillon, 1997: 12). In this view the world that I experience as I step out into

my garden is not quite *real*. Merleau-Ponty spent a great chunk of his life showing the falsity of this view: 'To ask if the world is real is not to know what one is saying' (PhP: 344; F396). The question contains its own answer! The view of perception as an entirely inner act in which we construct a representation of the world of our experience can imprison us for a whole life-time.

Re-awakening Perception

Merleau-Ponty, right from the opening pages of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, proclaims the immediacy and reality of perception:

...they [some scientists] take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a *world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me*. To 'return to the things themselves' is to return to a world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside. (PhP: IX; FIII Preface, emphases added)

Merleau-Ponty invites us to engage with the archaeology of our knowledge – 'a world that precedes knowledge'; this is that 'primordial silence', that very first 'perception' which is totally non-specific, yet out of which emerge all those horizons against which a world can come to be for me. This is 'an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition... I am still that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it' (PhP: 407; F466). Merleau-Ponty often says that his entire phenomenology is meant to be a reduction to the lived and pre-objective realm where our primordial contact is disclosed (Mallin, 1979: 53). My lived body is not distinct from me except in my thinking, when I step back from myself. But if it is a 'silence', how can it be called a 'perception'? It makes no sense unless I see my lived body, from the very first moment, alive with the intuition of being. My body is, and remains, a reservoir of knowledge and understanding for the rest of my life:

Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, ...the system 'self-others-things' as it comes into being, to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interests of the object which it presents to us... (PhP: 57; F69)

So, perception is essentially the opening up before us of a true and exact world. And the act of perception, like light, 'promotes its own oblivion' as it gives us the objects. Those who explain perception as a stimulus/response

phenomenon see life as a succession of psychic acts brought together into a synthetic unity by some nuclear 'I'. Not so the French philosopher:

I am not myself a succession of 'psychic' acts ...but one single experience inseparable from itself, one single 'living cohesion', one single temporality which is engaged, from birth, in making itself progressively explicit and in confirming that cohesion in each successive present. (PhP: 407; F466)

I step out into my garden, and a whole world of different things rushes up to meet me. Immediately I notice perception's *trick of hiding itself in the object*. 'The voices in my head' pull me away from the 'miracle of perception'. I notice that the grass needs cutting, the path is already overgrown, the tree is too close to my neighbour's fence! I am no longer allowing my body-consciousness to feed upon actuality but have imported a gallery of critics from the past. If I can turn away from the nagging and allow the riot of colours, sounds, sensations to inundate me, something else entirely happens. I am *gathered up* into the lovely contrast of the blue sky and the white clouds above the towering trees where I spot one of the two grey squirrels that play and feed incessantly around the garden. I notice a stream of delight filling me as I begin to live with the flicker of butterflies, the hum of a visiting bee (who somehow arouses my feeling of hope), and then there is my fascination with a cat staring at me from a safe distance, as if asking me, 'What are you doing here?' and inviting me to become part of his mysterious world. All of it delivering me a world: 'An open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication' (PhP: 71; F85).

Perception as Dialogue

I notice how the stuff of my experience makes meaning only as seen against a horizon or background: the trees against the background of sky, the animals against the background of the garden, the flowers need the green to show them up. I am not just a spectator; I am involved and engaged with what is coming to me. I am aware of belonging in this inundation of beauty. Paradoxically, I am part of it all and yet I am not, because I am perceiving it. The apple tree will not come down and embrace me, but the cat will sidle up to me and jump on my lap uninvited, and pushes his chin against mine. This very act of perception both involves me and separates me. I do not lose myself in it. Immediacy? It is only at the cost of unravelling my most basic certainties that I can deny the immediacy of my contact and belonging in this network

of relationships that we call 'a world'. If all this is just a construct of my mind, then all my knowledge and life are invalid.

Perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act apart from the end to which it is directed. Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality since perception is inseparable from the consciousness which it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself. (PhP: 374; F429)

What does this mean? Consciousness, like the rays from the sun, does not light up until it is filled with a presence. Being filled with a presence means, in a way, being filled with that 'other'. I feel the oak tree in my body. And every movement in consciousness is validated by my body. (Or is it the other way round?) The 'in a way' indicates that there is no ontological swap or loss on my part; the light that is my consciousness also illuminates what fills it. What does he mean by 'the same existential modality'? The perceiver and the object become like identical twins; difficult to tell apart. Yet consciousness is not easily fooled: I discern what is me from what is not-me; I know what is real from what is only a chimera. How? The same way I know that I am typing at my laptop in my study and I am not down in the lounge watching 'Match of the Day'. Actually, it is impossible to 'prove' this by logic. As Wittgenstein said: 'Look, don't think.' A Sophist one day said to Diogenes the Epicurean: 'I can prove to you that local motion is impossible!' Diogenes stood up and walked away! (Hadot, 2002).

One other thing: if someone gives me my breakfast and takes it away, I know that I have had no breakfast. The whole *raison d'être* of my sitting at the table becomes pointless. Similarly, if my consciousness is not filled with a presence, then it can fall back into blankness because nothing has been afforded it.

Perception carries a felt sense of being at home in the anonymous flux of the world. It is not just a thinking thing; it is a body thing; I am married to the world *voue au monde* – vowed to the world; 'every perception is a coition, so to speak, of our body with things' (PhP: 320; F370). My relationship with the world is not adequately expressed by my saying how I am being caught up in any particular part of it. The experience is profoundly paradoxical; the thing itself is paradoxical: that lovely oak tree delivers itself to me as swaying in the wind, a beauty against the blue sky and the white clouds; and it lords over the garden as a protecting presence. I have a sense of its inside. Yet beyond these aspects which I enjoy, it has a history

and a life and thousands of connections that are totally beyond me. This tree would mean nothing to me if it were not already in me, in some way; immanent to my way of being. And yet it transcends me in that it utterly recedes from me when I move away from those aspects that are on offer. My perception transcends the tree in that I am not filled by it and do not lose my identity in it; I perceive the tree in a background of other things. I give it meaning. The tree transcends me in that my perception of it 'always contains something more than what is actually given' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 16).

Truth in Perception?

Can I say that what I perceive is 'true'? Perception does not deliver us 'truths' like geometry does, but 'presences'. Propositional 'truth' belongs with language which expresses *thinking* – an appropriation *of*, a reflection *upon*, and a referral to the perceived world. 'The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 13). The ineluctable claim that truth makes upon us is a *life-direction* from beyond the horizon of our awareness. 'With the first vision, the first contact, there is... not the positing of a content, but the opening of dimension that can never again be closed.... a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:151). This is why, if I tell the police officer that I was not the driver of the car when, in fact, I was, my life can begin to unravel. A lie is an effort to close down a whole level of my perception.

Transcendence and 'Inner Perception'

The sense of unravelling arises because the act of perception does not 'have' transcendence, it *is* transcendence. Transcendence is 'the process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning' (PhP: 169; F197). This is an act of appropriation: the air I breathe is appropriated by me and shaped into sounds that become speech – a meaningful utterance of my existence, '...one single experience inseparable in itself, one single living cohesion... one single temporality...' (PhP: 407; F466). This means that every act of perception invokes the inexhaustible intelligibility of all the situations of my life. Their intelligibility means that they validate one another, they back one another up like the wagons in a train. This is a dynamic at the heart of perception which signals its presence only in its operation: the raised hand asking a question. My perception always 'moves beyond'. The opaqueness in every situation pushes me to ask more

questions, to reach for more understanding. This is an act of obedience to being that addresses me every moment of my life. As I contemplate this flower, my contemplation moves me to wonder at the intricacy of its structure; I experience its non-being or limitation, I experience my own limitation. This experience of limitation is an experience of 'wonder' or even of 'awe'. From this arises the summons to align myself with the truth. 'We are justified', says Merleau-Ponty, 'in speaking of an inner perception, of an inward sense, an "analyser" working from us to ourselves which, ceaselessly, goes some but not all the way in providing knowledge of our life and our being' (PhP: 380; F435). Some people speak of this as the 'inner soul' of the person or the 'Guardian Angel' of the person.

The 'Inward Sense' of Being-Given

I notice this 'inward sense' in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, in the story of Alyosha and the holy Father Zossima. After the death of his beloved spiritual guide and at the first signs of corruption of the body, Alyosha rushed from the room: 'He did not stop on the steps but went down rapidly. His soul overflowing with rapture was craving for freedom and unlimited space... the fresh motionless, still night embraced the earth. ...he could not have explained to himself why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it....' 'Someone visited my soul at that hour!', he used to say afterwards....' (1970: 426). The same inner still place also features a good deal in the diaries of Etty Hillesum (of 1941-3; Hillesum, 1996) in the face of Nazi persecution. I think this corresponds with what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of the 'primordial silence' (PhP: 184; F214).

Many thinkers will find talk of 'an inward sense' highly unsatisfactory. It is a knowledge of the heart. How much are we aware of what we 'know' only in our hearts? From our everyday experience we can say that just as there is such a thing as the insupportable pain of loneliness and loss so there is such a thing as the ecstasy of belonging: 'I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world', and the ecstasy is where one nests in this belonging; but if this 'hold' fails, it can seem like a dark abyss (PhP: 354; F406). If we discount as 'unreal' any prejudicial 'subjective' elements in our perception then I don't think we could ever dare to fall in love or have children.

The Reversal

Edzard Ernst, studying Arnica, found nothing in it which can stop bruising. He denounced as illusion the hopes people have that it may help them after an operation

(BBC Radio 4 'Today' Programme, 3 February 2003). He thoroughly analysed it chemically and gained a clear and distinct concept of Arnica. A question to the professor is this: is the efficacy of a medicine solely a function of its chemistry? His analysis omits the way in which history has endowed Arnica with healing powers, it omits the benefit conferred upon this substance by the love of the person who gave it to me for my nose operation; he discounts my belief that this will benefit me. He has substituted a *concept* of Arnica for a *perception* of Arnica, and then demanded that everyone else do the same. Chemical analysis gives us only one aspect of the thing. 'A reversal has taken place: the concept, itself founded on the percept, becomes the model and measure of the percept' (Dillon, 1997: 62). I am sure the professor would not make an appointment in his department on the basis of the concept of the candidate derived from a CV and the statements of referees. He would want to meet the candidate and perceive her/him in actuality.

Collapsing Perception through Reduction

There is strong tendency amongst some pioneers in the field of neuroscience to 'explain away' human phenomena. An example of this is in Vilayanur Ramachandran's Reith lectures, delivered on the BBC in 2003. Listen to the professor:

...even though it is common knowledge it never ceases to amaze me that all the richness of our mental life – all our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our ambitions, our love lives, our religious sentiments and even what each of us regards as his or her own intimate private self is simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in our heads, in our brains. There is nothing else. (2003: 4)

For Ramachandran, the senses receive stimulus from the environment, they pass that on to the brain which processes the sense data and thence emerges what we call 'perception'. It is a stimulus/ response phenomenon.

So what I am in immediate contact with is a construction of my mind: a *representation* of reality. The professor reduces the wonder of perception to a cause-and-effect process. He would say that the immediacy of contact which I experience in perception is an illusion. This is to deny that the ultimate reference point for the validity of all my experience is, in fact, my body. He has to say: What you feel – immediacy, presence – you do not experience. So we are in the difficult situation that '...what we experience is not real, and what is real is not what we experience' (Romanyshyn, 1982: 30).

Two Questions and a Consideration

Of course the professor is correct if he means that without all that neuronal activity we would perceive nothing at all. But he *omits the subject*: There is no one experiencing! And so, two fundamental questions arise straight away which Ramachandran does not address: firstly, by what process does the activity in the septum, in the hypothalamic nuclei, and so on, become what we actually *experience* as perception or, *mutatis mutandis*, lovemaking?

Could it possibly be that it is my *living being*, reaching out in perception and gratitude to the world, that inspires (breathes-life-into) all that brain activity? Could it possibly be that all this amazing brain activity is a kind of living dialogue between me – my living body – and the world? Merleau-Ponty would say that the professor has got it all the wrong way round. The activity in my brain does not confer meaning upon my perception of the garden; this meaning is the response of my whole human being, my embodied spirit, to the *already* structured world of my garden that gives point to my neuronal activity (Dillon, 1997: 63–6; PhP: 6–9; F14–16).

The second question arising is this. If my sense activity is to directly cause the upsurge of a true and exact world, then in order to produce a definite object of perception, there is required a point-by-point correspondence between the sense organ and the thing. However, there is no empirical evidence of such correspondence (Dillon, loc. cit. supra; Hass, 2007: 29–30; PhP: 7; F14). It is a fundamental fallacy to take sense-data (hot, cold, green, round, hard etc.), fix them as abstractions, and say they are the building blocks of perception. An abstraction takes us away from our experience. In such a theory of perception, experience becomes superfluous.

Another consideration: there is no neuroscientific discovery which warrants our saying that brains *love* or *think* or *worship* God like persons do. Ramachandran seems to think that there can be lovemaking going on in the brain (p. 68). The basic fallacy here is the ascription of human psychological attributes to the brain. And this error is very widespread in neuroscientific writing. In their monumental *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (2003), Bennett and Hacker call such ascription the Meriological Fallacy and attribute it to 'an unthinking adherence to a mutant form of Cartesianism' (loc. cit.: 72). They go on to say that such statements are not wrong but simply meaningless.

No Rivalry

I have the greatest respect for neuroscientists. These scientists are methodically exploring perception through a different route and establishing exactly how the environment interacts with the live structures of the lived body. In an essay, 'The metaphysical in man', Merleau-Ponty has something important to say about the tension between philosophy and the exact sciences:

There can be no rivalry between scientific knowledge and metaphysical knowing which continually confronts the former with its task. A science without philosophy would literally not know what it was talking about. A philosophy without methodical exploration of phenomena would end up with nothing but formal truths, which is to say, errors. (1964: 97)

Perception and Expression

Merleau-Ponty sees the act of perception as inseparable from expression. It is all one movement from the first primordial contact to the last syllable of singing the world. 'Expression is everywhere creative and what is expressed is always inseparable from it' (PhP: 391; F448). As soon as we try to decompose the act of perception – break it down into its component elements – it disappears like manna in the morning time. And perception is always in immediate touch with the world.


We observe at once that it is impossible ...to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts – and this whole is not an ideal whole. The meaning which I ultimately discover is not of the conceptual order. (1964: 15)

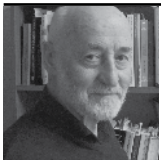
'Not of the conceptual order' – perception here is taken as a full-bodied engagement with the world: an ontological event. Nothing of me is lost. I am totally incarnated, manifested in my lived body. Each one of us is a unique world which is validated only in being shared, through expression, with the other. Without the other I am literally nothing, an emptiness crying out without words or gestures.

This is not easy to comprehend; we automatically impose upon the world the separations we make in our thinking. We so easily fall prey to the seduction of the abstract. We think of speech as separate from thoughts, persons as separate from their actions, things as separate from their *ambiance*. Edzard Ernst isolates Arnica from its context and mistakes an aspect for the totality. A person is an entity of a different order altogether to things: I am a transcendence made flesh in my act of perception. My perception is so personal to me that it cannot be

separated from me without cancelling me out. It is the way I am in the world. My act of perception is so instantaneous that it seems timeless; and yet it cannot be so because it involves stuff, matter, whose process is time. Our body turns our perceptions into expression in words. These words that we use every day presuppose, for their validity, a life already lived, '... a decisive step already taken' – otherwise they would be empty of meaning. Just as every word I utter presupposes all the words previously uttered, so every moment I live presupposes all the preceding moments, hours, days, months and years of my life; there they are all, leaning against one another (PhP: 69; F83). Every place I am presupposes not only the place I have come from, but all the places I have been to and left, in the course of my life. Only Batman and pixies are exempt from this law of our being. And all these are present in my body and activate every act of perception. When I greet a client with a handshake, all the books I have read, all the loves I have had, all the sufferings I have endured, all the opportunities missed, all the lies I have told, are running down my hand and into the hand of the other. Perception delivers presences and the carrier of all those presences is my lived body, if I am alive enough to know it.

It is the same with my talk: every experience moves inevitably towards expression. So much is expression an integral part of our experience that we do not know what we think until we speak. And beneath all the noise of our words is a primordial silence into which Merleau-Ponty would have us enter, if we want to deepen our view of what human existence is about.

Our view of human being will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back (*remonterons*) to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks the silence. The spoken word is a gesture and its meaning is a world. (PhP: 184; F214) 



Desmond Kennedy has practised Gestalt therapy in the Wirral for the past 20 years. His background is Irish, Jesuit and academic. His passion is the breakthrough philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), whose thought gives body to the tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. Desmond's doctoral thesis (which has been published) deals with the application of the French philosopher's phenomenology to dialogic psychotherapy. His writings are also available in the *British Gestalt Journal*.

Note

1 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1986) p. 184. Henceforth I shall reference this work as 'PhP' and then give the English page reference, followed by the French (1945): (PhP: 184; F214)

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