



The Partial Re-enchantment of Nature Through the Analysis of Perception

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Abstract Scientific reductionism has deprived the world of what was once an enchanted universe full of forms and spirits that haunted the medieval world. Merleau-Ponty and the late Husserl attempt to re-enchant nature but from the point of view of perception. Their insistence on structure and perceptual form provides a bulwark against reductionism and therefore in a sense re-enchants a world, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, that is “condemned to meaning.” “Condemned to meaning” signifies being forced to acknowledge the genetic dependency (or *Fundierung*) of our full-blown rational accomplishments, our acts of relating divorced from the already perceived relatedness, on lower-level, pre-rational events in which the self is latently present. Being “condemned to meaning” signifies that fully articulated logical and rational achievements must be traced back for their meaningfulness to proto-rational structures in the field of perception. It is a joint critique of empiricism that Merleau-Ponty and Husserl reveal the pre-predicative realm as a realm of genuine meaning. The partially re-enchanting world is one that is conditioned by meaningful horizons, which are real aspects of the world to be described. I argue that optimally disclosive perception gets at the things themselves at their disclosive telos, where they show themselves at their best. I conclude with some remarks about how this conception of re-enchantment engages the philosophy of John McDowell, who is *malgré lui* a proponent of structure in the perceptual field.

Modern philosophy and science seem to have demythologized the world and stripped it of meaning. Schiller and Heidegger called this event the *Entgötterung der Natur* and Weber referred to it as the *Entzauberung der*

Natur. Both terms are referring to the loss of intrinsic meaning, objective purpose, and final causality in the modern scientific conception of nature. What is left after the Baconian conquest of Platonic shadows and phantoms is a world bereft of intrinsic significance or norms. The flight of a sparrow is just matter in motion; the raising of a hand is just a quantitative event in a deterministic universe. As D.M. Armstrong puts it, we have “general scientific grounds for thinking that man is nothing but a physical mechanism,” that “mental states are, in fact, nothing but physical states of the central nervous system.”¹ According to J.J.C. Smart’s materialism, “there is nothing in the world over and above those entities which are postulated by physics.”² Stephen Stich’s eliminative materialism goes even further in reducing non-naturalistic intentionality to a fiction:

[I]ntentional states and processes that are alluded to in our everyday descriptions and explanations of people’s mental lives and their actions are *myths*. Like the gods that Homer invoked to explain the outcome of battles, or the witches that inquisitors invoked to explain local catastrophes, they *do not exist*.³

Quine famously shows the essential difference between phenomenological intentionality and scientific naturalism:

I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse *about* tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil.⁴

What cannot be excluded, however, is this “aboutness,” which is precisely what distinguishes phenomenology, which asks transcendental questions about “aboutness,” from naturalism, which takes it unquestionably for granted.

But what happens in an objective science of subjectivity? Is not the object of such research an acosmic thinking subject inundated with un-

¹ D.M. Armstrong, “The Nature of Mind,” in *The Mind-Brain Identity Theory*, ed. C.V. Borst (London: Macmillan, 1979), 75, 67.

² *Essays Metaphysical and Moral: Selected Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 203.

³ *Deconstructing the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.

⁴ W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 228, emphasis added.

associated sense data? There is to be sure in naturalism so conceived a concern that knowledge be knowledge of the transcendent, but the perceived world becomes a purely subjective and self-enclosed world of first-person feels or takes on the world. Moreover, appearances are no indication of the truth of a thing; put differently, the question to phenomenology is how the “mereness” of appearance can overcome the world’s otherness. For in a disenchanted world the status of perception becomes relegated to first-person access to subjective qualia. All significance is human significance, the result of sense-bestowals or -projections upon objectively meaningless phenomena. Indeed, in the rationalist or idealist system all meaning is constructed by an active synthesis by a transcendental ego. There is no longer any sense in which phenomena disclose themselves as *already* meaningful to a perceiver actively *and* passively engaged in the environment. There is no longer any sense in which phenomena are “taken in” as meaningful, i.e., as embedded within a network of relationships and related to their *telos*, the way of being at their best in displaying the world. There is allegedly no longer any sense to the idea that meaningful syntheses that are at the heart of constituted objects, persons, places and events are organized in a Gestalt-theoretical autochthonous way and spontaneously in the person’s interaction with the world; as a result, according to the disenchantment of nature, all wholes come from us, and all ordering of phenomena into contexts is a product of spontaneous understanding.¹

So we moderns uncomfortably make our way in the disenchanted naturalistic backdrop against which the late Husserl and the early Merleau-Ponty engaged in their methodical description of pre-predicative and lived-through pre-logical experience. When Merleau-Ponty declares in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that we are “condemned to meaning,” he is declaring that meaning has a non-human source in nature in the way that synthetic perceptions come about in orderable contexts. “Condemned to meaning” signifies being forced to acknowledge the genetic dependency (or *Fundierung*) of our full-blown rational accomplishments, our acts of relating divorced from the already perceived relatedness, on lower-level, pre-rational events in which the self is latently present. Being “condemned to meaning”

¹ On Gestalt implications in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, see M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 2nd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), ch. 4. Dillon describes what different Gestalt psychologists considered the characteristics shared by what is considered “good Gestalt”: regularity, symmetry, simplicity, inclusiveness, unity, harmony, conciseness, stability, clarity, and good arrangement. See Dillon, 67.

signifies that fully articulated logical and rational achievements must be traced back for their meaningfulness to proto-rational structures in the field of perception. In this paper I will argue that the late Husserl and the Merleau-Ponty of the *Phenomenology of Perception* achieve a re-enchantment of nature, at least in the sphere of perception. No longer are we speaking of portents and signs and traces of the divine or the mystical; now we can talk of the generation of sense in the place where few venture to find it: in the preconceptual realm of perception, in the world of appearances understood as disclosive of the world to a worldly—but in no sense universal—subject embedded in the world as embodied.

To the materialist views cited above, Merleau-Ponty retorts: “Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they 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 round me and begins to exist for me.”¹

Merleau-Ponty and Husserl on the Criticism of Empiricism

We turn first to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the incapacity of empiricism to explain fully our perceptual being-in-the-world. Prior to the constituted objective world, there is a phenomenal field in which phenomena take shape as the appearances of things. For its part, in its intentional directedness to sensations as so-called basic “units of experience,” the scientific-natural attitude unknowingly dismisses this phenomenal field. What we find in ordinary perception is *not* internal sensations, but external things: objects, people, places and events. Nowhere in perception do we come across discrete qualitative bits of experience abstracted from the external perceptually coherent environment. The very notion of a sense datum as perceptually relevant or meaningful needs to be called into question: “Pure sensation [would] be the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dotlike impact,” much like the effect Seurat’s *pointillisme* would have at close range. (3)

According to Merleau-Ponty, sensing is the lowest form of perception, the least active on the part of the subject. If a sensation can be described as a

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (NY: Routledge, 2002), ix. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically by page number.

part of a holistic experience of a full-blown perceptual object, there is still something in the sensed that draws the attention to something similar or dissimilar, same and other. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “each elementary perception is therefore already charged with a *meaning*” (4) and “an expressive value” (7). Husserl had already discussed an affective allure at the lowest level of conscious life, a stimulus that wakes consciousness up, so to speak. The genetically primary consciousness is consciousness of or sensitivity to patterns of homogeneous sense-unities against a heterogeneous background. Associated phenomenal structures, as opposed to atomic sense data, make up what is experienced from the first-person perspective. When Merleau-Ponty writes, “This red would not literally be the same if it were not the ‘wooly red’ of a carpet” (5), he is pointing to the fact that in perception we pick up objects and their internal and external horizons as well.

In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl thematizes not *Gegebenheit*, but *Vorgegebenheit*. Pre-giveness applies to things that stand out in prominence and so to speak “excite” us to perception. Before the self has exercised any constitution of objects, there is the prepredicative, prereflective, prelinguistic opening on to things that exercise an affective allure upon us. We are still in the domain of passivity where the ego is not yet engaged in active participation.

Givenness can be understood in *Experience and Judgment* as the yielding of the self to the allure and turning toward it attentively. Passivity amounts to the basic essential conditions of a subjectivity itself. Originally the concept of allure (*Reiz*) had a naturalistic sense in the psychology of the late 1800s. But Husserl appropriates the concept as part of his project in *Ideas II* to sketch out the motivational relation between the lived body and the life-world. *Reiz* can be translated as obtrusion, stimulus, attraction, or appeal.¹ The object or state of affairs beckons consciousness to examine it more closely. To follow the appeal is to set in motion first a yielding and then a striving toward the maximum or optimal givenness of the phenomenon. Following the appeal is turning toward that which calls, and this *Zuwendung* occurs in the domain of active receptivity. Husserl makes clear that activity and passivity, spontaneity and receptivity are for him relative terms. Receptivity is the lowest level of the activity of the ego. As he puts it, “Insofar as in this turning-toward the ego receives what is pre-given to it through the affecting stimuli, we can speak here of the receptivity of the ego... This phenomenologically necessary concept of receptivity is in no

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Analyses concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (henceforth APS), trans. Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), xliv-xlv.

way exclusively opposed to that of the activity of the ego... Receptivity must be regarded as the lowest level of activity.”¹ The tendency of the *Zuwendung* continues as a tendency toward complete fulfillment (82). An intention that goes beyond the given tending towards a progressive *plus ultra*.” (82)

It is the exception and not the rule that we occasionally hear a pure ringing in the ear or an afterimage. More likely is that we perceive at the sensuous level indeterminate, vague, ambiguous, and imprecise and *yet no less meaningful* Gestalt figures enabled by the holistic impact of sensings. Gestalt theory holds correctly that there is no isomorphism between the contents and the causes of perception. Empiricism overlooks the inevitable *context* of perception which discrete stimuli will direct us towards, in the sense of completing a perceptual Gestalt. (13) The whole horizon of perception is what holds irreducible meaning. What is to be explored is the pre-objective realm and its teleological relation with the objective grasp of the meaning already latent, though indeterminate, on the sensory level. Something is pre-objective when it has a structure that resists articulation into a content that allows it to be grasped in thought. Temporally speaking, the past and future are understood as horizons or fields, instead of a collection of discrete impressions:

Now the sensation and images which are supposed to be the beginning and end of all knowledge never make their appearance anywhere other than within a horizon of meaning, and the significance of the percept... is in fact presupposed in all association. (18)

Merleau-Ponty describes in the most basic of perceptions, an articulable state of affairs, an “immanent order” lying merely “latent” in the landscape, (20) and “a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning.” (25) As he puts it, “The different parts of the whole—for example, the portions of the figure nearest to the background—possess, then, besides a color and qualities, a particular significance (*un sens*).” (15)

Matter is “pregnant” with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the “world,” that both are present to us practically rather than being explicitly known or posited by us, and that finally the relation, which is somehow

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, rev. ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 79.

organic, of the perceiving subject and world, involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence.¹

If we rely on Husserl's notion of constitution, and Merleau-Ponty's non-idealistic understanding of it, we can say that constitution is "letting something be seen as what it is by placing it in ordered contexts."² Constitution always take place by articulating internal and external horizons. Inner horizons consist of the anticipations and prefigurations that I have already in mind as I approach the object. So perceiving involves progressive pre-conceptual fillings and emptyings. As Dermot Moran puts it, "Certain prefigurations get filled in intuitively, while new expectations are opened up."³ It is the constant simultaneously passive and active waiting to have something fill one's empty intentions that accounts for the dynamism of perception. What, then, is thought, for Merleau-Ponty? It is the conscious passing from the indeterminate to the determinate. (36) For him, "the active constitution of a new object... makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon." (35) There is a healthy sense of a pre-logical domain in which consciousness does not yet possess fully determinate objects—it is a lived-through logic, with an immanent meaning which remains partially unclear at the non-conceptual stage. (57)

The disenchanted world of science is a universe and not a world; it is horizonless, lacks context, and assumes an untenable third-person view from nowhere; it is what Bernard Williams calls "the absolute conception." It is an either/or perspective based on strict binary thought with a punctual world and a behavior-stimulus response as the only pre-rational engagement with the world (but pre-rational here implies no connection to rationality). What is incoherent about the view from nowhere is that it represents a complete and self-sufficient view of reality. But its concepts do derive their meaning from our ordinary pre-reflective experience of the world as experienced from our many different "views from somewhere."

¹ "The Primacy of Perception," in the *Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 89.

² Mark A. Wrathall, "Existential Phenomenology," in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 33.

³ Dermot Moran, *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 164-65.

Normal, Optimal Perception

Nature gives itself to be perceived from better and worse perspectives; hence we can speak of natural norms of perceiving that have at least as much to do with the way the world manifests itself as it does with how the subject positions itself. To capture the meaningful passively constituted structures one must first be in relative good health, possess good vision, etc. Circumstances must be normal: daylight, sufficient illumination to detect color and contrast, without the interference of any colored medium, to say nothing of an ill-disposed mood or emotion.¹ As Husserl puts it, the qualities of material things as aestheta present themselves intuitively to one's "normal sensibility" in motivated series of "appropriate order."² Normal appearances are "ortho-aesthetic," and the perceiver thereby achieves an optimally disclosive perception.³ There are optimal viewing distances when contemplating, say, a painting, especially an Impressionistic one; there are optimal acoustic conditions in the symphony hall when, say, the cougher stops coughing. There is an a priori correlation between the displayability of the world and the registering of particular displays by the perceiver. A perceiver motivated erotically toward revealing the exhaustive presentability of the world can only be motivated in this way if he is in fact aware that he can only be co-conscious of the indefinite number of "other sides of things."

¹ See the extended description of normative, optimal disclosure in *Ideas I*: "A violin tone, in contrast, with its objective identity, is given by adumbration, has its changing modes of appearance. These differ in accordance with whether I approach the violin or go farther away from it, in accordance with whether I am in the concert hall itself or am listening through the closed doors, etc. No one mode of appearance can claim to be the one that presents the tone absolutely although, in accordance with my practical interests, a certain appearance has a certain primacy as the normal appearance: in the concert hall and at the "right" spot I hear the tone "itself" as it "actually" sounds. In the same way we say that any physical thing in relation to vision has a normal appearance: we say of the color, the shape, the whole physical thing which we see in normal daylight and in a normal orientation relative to us, that this is how the thing actually looks; this is its actual color, and the like." (*Ideas I*, §44.)

² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book* (henceforth *Ideas II*), trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), §18a. See also his *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), §36 and §38.

³ *Ideas II*, §18c.

It is not, as Bacon thought, a regrettable state of affairs that Nature often hides herself. While it is indeed true that Nature is often recalcitrant to our expectant perception, it can nonetheless emerge from hiddenness and reveal itself precisely as that which was formerly absent. Indeed, even to say that Nature hides herself is to realize the conditions of possibility of hiddenness and revelation. These conditions imply that intentional contact with the external world—the primary explanandum of modern philosophy and the rise of modern science—is achieved by series of intentionally horizoned orthoaesthetic displays.

Merleau-Ponty mentions a case in which the branches of trees appear to merge with the funnels or masts of a wooden ship in the harbor. (20) As the perceiver approaches to disambiguate the perceived objects, a vague expectation arises that the different objects can be allowed to be seen in an orderable context as what they are. He says of the ship:

The unity of the object is based on the foreshadowing of an *immanent order* which is about to spring upon us a reply to questions merely *latent* in the landscape. It solves a problem set only in the form of a vague feeling of uneasiness, it organizes elements which up to that moment did not belong to the same universe and which, for that reason, as Kant said with profound insight, could not be associated. (20, my italics)

Husserl's genetic phenomenology points to the ambition of our empty intentions: "External perception is a constant pretension to accomplish something that, by its very nature, it is not in a position to accomplish. Thus, it harbors a contradiction, as it were."¹ There is an interplay between the sensory gestalt and the logical domain. There is a sense in perception of indeterminate determinability, that is, the sense that no matter how much I have explicated the perceptual object through different profiles, there is always a *plus ultra* to be determined at some other point in time. That is, the identity of objects is secured by the running-through of manifolds of appearance. Anticipatory intentions are grounded in former intentions. We are co-conscious of aspects of things—we have a fore-understanding of what there is to come. And what is to come is, in normal harmonious experience, blended in with what is known already about things. Thus there is a norm in nature in the way a natural object gives itself to the perceiver. We have a general attunement to what is there, but this is not knowledge in the sense of clear and distinct atomism. Thus Merleau-Ponty speaks of a Logos of the

¹ APS, 39.

aesthetic world, whose noetic correlate is an operative intentionality already at work before any thetic positing or judging.

Conclusion: McDowell and the Pre-conceptual Registering of Natural Meaning

Merleau-Ponty and Husserl would find an unlikely ally in detecting a re-enchantment in the world of perception in John McDowell. McDowell's *Mind and World* has set the tone of the contemporary debate about whether human perception is possible only to the extent that the perceiver has acquired the appropriate conceptual capacities available to specify perceptual content. He argues that conceptual capacities are that in virtue of which sensations represent the intelligibility of the perceptual world. According to McDowell, perception is continuous in some sense with conceptual knowledge insofar as cognitive processes in some form are actualized all the way down in passive perception. What is at issue is whether a world-presenting passive perceptual state is of a different species from a mental state in which one actively makes conceptual distinctions, identifications, and judgments.

McDowell wants to suggest that “the paradigmatic or central cases of actualization of conceptual capacities are in *judgment*, and that is free, responsible cognitive activity.”¹ The act of judging can be “singled out as the paradigmatic mode of actualization of conceptual capacities.”² Although McDowell argues that experiences are to be modeled on acts of judgment—because they capture the synthetic togetherness of a perceptual state of affairs—he nonetheless admits that this conception “leaves room for conceptual capacities... to be actualized in non-paradigmatic ways, in kinds of occurrence other than acts of judging.”³ We must therefore distinguish “the occurrence of an experience” from the occurrence of an *act* of judgment.

I argue that despite McDowell's so-called conceptualism, he shares with Merleau-Ponty the notion of pre-conceptual synthetic organization or relatedness presented to the perceiver, in such a way that this perceptual content can be isomorphic with the content of a full-blown judgment, say, in the sense of a Kantian judgment of perception. The isomorphism occurs at

¹ “Reply to Olav Gjelsvik,” in *Theoria* 70 (2004):194.

² “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality,” in *The Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1998): 434.

³ See his “Experiencing the World,” in *Reason and Nature*, ed. Marcus Willaschek (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000), 10-11.

the level of passive synthesis and an active, conceptual synthesis. To judge that “S is p” is to have already noticed preconceptually that p belongs to S. According to Merleau-Ponty, there is an ultimacy to how Kantian affinity is the constitution “of a *significant grouping*.” (61) Genetically speaking, one must find beneath the level of conceptual definitions the latent meaning of lived experiences, which is to say one must find the existential meaning of a subject coming to grips with its world. For beneath the conceptual level, there is “a sense in certain aspects without having myself endowed them with through any constituting operation.” (252) It is precisely this “sense” that is the token of disclosable meaning in nature.

What is clear by now is that, *contra* McDowell, Merleau-Ponty would claim that p’s belonging to S is first noticed in what he calls *wordless* intentions. A wordless intention seems, however, to be a limit concept of a perceptual intention in which words are wavering under the surface, teleologically directed toward the expression of the perceptual state in syntax. Words are provoked and incited to find their rest in logical form. This is an aspect of Husserl’s going beyond Merleau-Ponty, who seems to stay at the level of sensibility to the detriment of rising to the level of explicit reason.

To return briefly to McDowell: The debate between conceptualism and non-conceptualism rages in analytic philosophy about the conceptual aspect of perceptual intentions.¹ Whereas one could argue that Merleau-Ponty understands that every perception is directed at cultural objects and such with sedimented conceptual meaning, it is the task of the perceiver to reawaken those conceptual sedimentations and situate them in syntactical form for public display. But first and foremost, the subject intends the nonconceptual world: a world full of partially re-enchanted existential meaning, an irreducible world in which meaning *per se* is not swallowed up by the naturalistic attitude. Meaning is latent in any encountered state of affairs in an organic way, such that the potential of significance is grasped, and not first introduced, by perceptual and then theoretical reason. Far from being an animistic viewpoint on nature that sees occult qualities and personal or personified causation everywhere in action, the phenomenology of perception asserts that experience plays a real role in supplying norms of perception. To the truth achieved by logical syntax there corresponds the latent truthfulness of states of affairs that are displayable to the appropriate perceptual viewpoints. If indeed the disenchantment of nature implies the de-animation of the world, phenomenology plays an essential role in restoring to

¹ See, for example, *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*, ed. York H. Gunther (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003).

human cognition its intentional animating character of sense-experience. To animate intentionally toward the truthfulness of worldly states of affairs is to be receptive of the meanings of those affairs as they display themselves to intentionality. Thus the displayability of the world is the best argument for the irreducibility of autochthonous organization in the layout of nature. In sum, phenomenological *description* is the necessary complement to modern scientific descriptions, which at their origin are really not *descriptions*, but *prescriptions*.¹ We must therefore distinguish two kinds of intelligibility, the intelligibility that is sought by natural science, and the intelligibility of displays and claims in the logical space of reasons, to use Sellars' phrase. In this way we can both discern the conditions of possibility of claims made in the space of reasons and avoid what McDowell calls a "regress into a pre-scientific superstition, a crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world."²

¹ See David Ray Griffin, "The Reenchantment of Science," 488.

² John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 72.