

Holism in perception

– Merleau-Ponty on senses and objects

skrevet af David Ekdahl, KU · udgivet 1. december 2015 · 4949 ord

Abstract

In this article, I set out to explore Merleau-Ponty's view of our senses and their interconnection with perceptual phenomena. In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty, I draw on contemporary empirical research exploring synesthesia and its importance for understanding non-synesthetic perception. Combining points from Merleau-Ponty with research from the last twenty years of synesthesia-research, which, sadly, has gone by relatively unnoticed by philosophers interested in the problem of perception, I attempt to show how a modular view of mind distorts the nature of perception. I further reject the idea that a perceived object is an empty intellectual *substance* or bearer of qualities, but I also reject the idea that the qualities in themselves are what truly matters in a perceived object. Instead, I advocate a more dynamic and holistic view, where the qualities of the percept entwine and saturate each other just as our senses always communicate and influence each other. This is a view where modular interpretations of our senses and perceptual qualities are viewed as perverting the primordial nature of perception itself since they overlook the dynamic way in which the living, *embodied* subject and perceived object are correlated.

Holism in perception: Merleau-Ponty on senses and objects

Object-perception is an arduous business. How do we account for perceptual constancy; the unified identity of a perceived object over time? How do we pick out one visual object amongst a whole array of visual

phenomena within the entirety of the visual field? Does the object itself somehow help us set it apart, or does our ability to segregate and identify objects pertain to something that *we* bring to the table in the perceptual situation? I wish here to explore a possible answer to these questions by delving into Merleau-Ponty's holistic view of the nature of perception and the perceived. This will lead us around in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and much material will be covered in a short span. Worth noting is the fact that there is an important and vast *motor-intentional* and action-based aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception that does not come to the fore in the paper and I will not elaborate much on it due to its immensity and spatial requirement. In this context, it should of course be mentioned that the points conceived by proponents of *enactivism* and *embodied cognition* echo a lot of the points Merleau-Ponty insisted on over sixty years ago. We see this, for instance, in the work of Alva Noë, who notably states that perception is not passive reception, but something *we do* (Noë 2004: 1). This implies that not only are we active, but we are *involved*, and what I highlight in this paper can definitely be seen as an attempt to show one aspect of how deeply we, as embodied agents, are involved, and how subject and object animate each other.

I do not believe that I am presenting a controversial interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of object-perception, rather this is an attempt to portray, as lucidly as possible, certain relevant thoughts from across his *magnum opus* in a structurally meaningful way. That being said, I believe one of the article's strengths is its lucidity, and while a lot of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts found no room in this paper, the ones that did find room present themselves intelligibly and coherently.

Part 1 of my paper will consist of an exploration of Merleau-Ponty's view of our senses' dynamic role for us as embodied, unified powers, and how he in this context can argue that synesthesia is the norm and not the exception. I will in this context draw on different empirical findings. In

Part 2, I will lay out Merleau-Ponty's notion of the symbolism of the thing and try to elucidate how this should be understood. Part 3 will sum up how these notions of synergy and symbolism come together and give us a holistic take on perception wherein perceiver and perceived always form a communion. Finally, I will conclude on the importance of holding on to a dynamic, holistic structure of lived perception.

Part 1: Synesthesia

We might conceive of our senses as distinct sensory inputs that are somehow synthesized cognitively or habitually to form one unified experience. In this case, on the level of primordial perception, vision, sound, touch, etc., are each completely distinct forms of sensory inputs. In cognitive science, this is called the *modularity of mind* (Fodor 1983: 1). Seeing a meal while one is eating it are two different worlds at first that are synthesized from each distinct sense into one stream of consciousness. When we conceive of our senses like this, it is hardly strange why a condition like *synesthesia* can seem so odd. Indeed, for many years in the latter half of the 20th century, synesthesia was largely discarded or ignored in the cognitive sciences due to its incommensurability with the model of the brain of the times (even if reports of it had been known for hundreds of years) (Cytowic 1995: 2). Synesthesia, meaning "joint sensation", is the somewhat rare¹ condition whereby a subject perceives one type of sensory input directly as at least one other type. One might, when hearing music, experience it as color(s) as well, one might, when reading, experience the written words with certain tastes; or perhaps numbers or days of the week have a certain personality, etc. If you have one form of synesthesia, there is about 50% chance that you have more than one (Cytowic 2009: 23). An important point is that, generally, subjects with this condition do not have

¹ The exact epidemiology of synesthesia is still uncertain and different research shows quite different statistics.

separate experiences whenever the synesthesia is prominent. It is not that, for instance, listening to Mozart “invokes” the color yellow alongside the music as two separate experiences, rather, the music *is* the color yellow. As Merleau-Ponty formulates it: “it is the sound itself that he sees, at the place where colors form” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 238). This might at first seem odd. Colors are simply not sounds. But, for Merleau-Ponty, cases of synesthesia actually highlight an important truth about our senses: while in one sense distinct, our senses actually work together and saturate each other in a much closer way than what we might assume. On the level of lived reality, the field of the phenomenologist, our senses all cooperate because we are embodied² subjects comporting ourselves towards certain actions, things and possibilities.

In fact, cases of synesthesia do not reveal certain types of individuals with faulty wiring to us – and, neurologically speaking, synesthesia is not classified as a defect – nothing is “wrong” with the synesthete. It is not that these cases are cases of a radically new and strange cognitive skill set, rather, we are all in a sense synesthetic. Recent research by Palmer et al. showed that when *chromesthetic*³ synesthetes and non-synesthetes were exposed to the same classical music and asked what color the musical piece was, even though each reply was relatively idiosyncratic (as synesthesia is well known to be (Cytowic 1995: 2)), there were undeniably overall similar tendencies when it came to music – even across the replies of the synesthetes and non-synesthetes (Palmer, Langlois, & Schloss 2015; Palmer, Schloss, Xu, & Prado-Legon 2013). Slow music is darker (and larger), fast music is lighter (and smaller). This suggests that the approach by means of which, in this case, sound and visual phenomena are entwined is not entirely relative to each individual, and neither to the prominence of synesthesia.

² I will not elaborate much further on the concept of embodiment. Due to a lack of space, I have to expect a basic understanding with the concept on behalf of the reader.

³ Chromesthesia is the synesthetic condition of seeing sounds as colors.

This general synergetic tendency across different types of phenomena can be further illustrated: Imagine I draw a soft and cloud-like shaped figure, and next to it an edgy and pointy figure, and then I tell you that one figure is called *Moomba* and one is called *Kiktikka* but that you have to figure out which is which. For the vast majority of people, it seems intuitively obvious that the “softer” figure entwines with the “softer word” (*Moomba*) and vice versa, but how can a sound and a figure both *be* soft, and thus in this sense the same?

The colors that non-synesthetes had to align to the music were hardly chosen by means of intellectual parameters, but *felt* by means of bodily ones. One does not deduce a color when listening to the music, one feels the music with the whole body and tries to figure out what color the feeling is. A plausible explanation for how this alignment of color and sound could be made for non-synesthetes similarly to synesthetes is if their perception is already holistic and thus somehow structurally similar to the synesthetes, albeit much less explicitly so. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, our senses can *communicate* like this because they share “a meaningful core” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 239). We do not have to look to empirical studies to find evidence of this. We comport ourselves towards things with our whole sensual and bodily being every day:

By opening up to the structure of the thing, the senses communicate among themselves. We see the rigidity and the fragility of the glass and, when it breaks with a crystal-clear sound, this sound is borne by the visible glass. [...] The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: the form has a certain relation with their very nature and it speaks to all of our senses at the same time as it speaks to vision. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 238)

The point here must be understood properly: The senses are indeed distinct, but given that they are all usually deployed all the time, no sense ever senses in isolation. Our body is a “synergetic system of which all the functions are taken up and tied together in the general movement of being

in the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 243). When I engage sensually with any-thing or part of the world, I am already invoking my whole sensory being and all my senses saturate, and are saturated by, this. Similar to how a synesthete might see (and hear) Mozart’s music directly as yellow, we all *see* the rigidity of glass or the potential auditory clanging of copper pots. But, one might object: What sets for instance a chromesthete apart from the non-synesthete certainly has to do with more than the explicitness of some sensed interconnectedness – there is a literal color sensation where there should be none, whereas with object-perception for non-synesthetes we simply *connect* all the perceived phenomena! This would, however, miss the point of the argument presented here. First of all, because even if colors are not normally *heard* in music, even the non-synesthetes did not just randomly attach colors to music, rather they share a deep structural identity with the chromesthetes regarding how music *affects* our bodies “chromatically” – how it is felt. Secondly, as Merleau-Ponty points out, we quite often *perceive* what is not physically or even terminologically present at all, similarly to the chromesthetes. In discussing what can be an object of perception, Merleau-Ponty brings up the example of seeing love in the flowers that one is gathering for a bouquet.

The perceived is not necessarily an object present in front of me as a term to be known, it might be a ‘unit of value’ that is only present to me in practice. [...] Love is in the bouquets that Félix de Vandenesse prepares for Madame de Mortsau. [...] It is evident that the bouquet is a bouquet of love and yet it is impossible to say what in the bouquet signifies love [...]. The only way of understanding the bouquet is by looking at it and then it says what it means. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 235)

Amongst his last twenty years of neuropsychological research, a similar view of synesthesia as a gateway to understanding perceptual cognition has been developed by Richard E. Cytowic. He has argued that synesthesia may be seen as a condition whereby one is more aware of the holistic

nature of perception compared to most non-synesthetes (Cytowic 1995: 10). For him, we are all in an important sense synesthetes, only we hardly ever notice it: We all possess this capacity for drawing on all our senses to make sense of the world. We see explicit examples of this in the way we speak and use metaphors, as Cytowic also points out. A cheese can be *sharp*, a person might be *sweet*, or a mood can be *low*.⁴ Metaphors are wonderful, softcore examples of synesthesia and likely have their roots in the holistic nature of both our perception and cognition. If this is true – if perception is a “*sensorium commune*” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 246) – then the first step has already been taken towards an explanation of what gives objects their unity and identity. In order to grasp this more clearly, we now need to look closer at Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the perceived thing.

Part 2: Symbolism

In approaching the phenomenology of the perceptual thing (as well as other relevant aspects; like perceptual constants and hallucinations), Merleau-Ponty’s overall goal is to explain how objectivity is possible in perception and what this notion of objectivity amounts to. Part of his response to this has to do with what he calls “The existential unity of the thing”, whereby in each thing there is what Merleau-Ponty labels “a symbolism” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 333): “In the thing, there is a symbolism that links each sensible quality to the others” (ibid.). I very much doubt that Merleau-Ponty with this term has some abstract concept in mind for each thing, even if the conceptual side of cognition very well might play an important role.⁵ *Symbolism* for Merleau-Ponty has to do with a sort of thing-pertaining interconnectedness of qualities and not an abstract concept or something akin to that. Interestingly, the word *symbol*

⁴ For more on metaphors’ role in cognition, see (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003)

⁵ Developing this point further would take us far into the conceptualism vs non-conceptualism debate, and thus I will not approach this point

(French: *symbole*) has its origin in the Greek *sym-bolon*, which literally translates to something like “that which is thrown (or cast) together”.

Keeping this in mind, what Merleau-Ponty is aiming at is a characterization of the unity of the thing as having to do with *the way* the qualities or sensory givens interplay in our perception of them; the way they are thrown together. A thing is not a compilation of simple qualities like a bundle theorist might advocate, nor is it a set of qualities pertaining to some substratum or intellectual unity (ibid.: 333). Rather, what we have here is a different approach than any of the aforementioned. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no “*substance*” or “*indeterminable X*” (ibid.: 333), but neither can the thing be reduced to its isolatable qualities as if on a checklist. On one hand, given that there is no substance or unity imposed by the intellect, a thing is nothing but its qualities, but in saying this, we must not ignore that, given the holistic nature of perception, the qualities are not isolated entities that we synthesize, but aspects of the thing that are tightly interwoven together (ibid.: 332). Just like our whole sensory being informs all our senses, so too the qualities of the thing saturate each other in our involvement with them: “the arrangement of the color upon the thing (and in the work of art if it fully captures the thing) by itself signifies all the responses that it would give to the interrogation of my other senses” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 332).

This primordial interconnectedness that any-thing has is part of the reason why perception is not a matter of constructing objects out of qualities; we are already attuned to the perception of *things*. In perception, we first perceive things, then qualities: “To begin with, a thing has *its* size and *its* shape beneath perspectival variations, which are merely apparent” (ibid.: 313).

Sean Kelly, in one of his articles on Merleau-Ponty’s view of perceptual constancy, has furthermore suggested that Merleau-Ponty, in

arguing that qualities get their meaning by pertaining to objects, is getting at something akin to a phenomenological variation of Frege's notion of *unsaturated concepts* (or predicates) and their necessary connection with *logical subjects* (Kelly 2007: 40). For Frege, predicates only get their meaning by "connecting" with a subject, just like red only makes sense when it is the red of *something* (Frege 1951: 193). However, even if this structure partly holds true for Merleau-Ponty's view of perception, it is not the whole story.

Consider by analogy the task of cooking and tasting a meal. The meal in this case is the perceptual object. On one hand, nothing goes into the meal that could not be put on an isolatable recipe-list, but that is far from what makes the meal what it is. You have not eaten the meal by consuming each ingredient separately, nor do you taste each ingredient separately at the same time when you eat the meal. There is a whole network of relations of *how* all the ingredients interplay. What matters at least as much as the ingredients in the end of the home-cooked meal is the dynamism or symbiosis between them. Of course, someone with a skilled pallet might be able to decrypt what has been put into the pot; like a painter might be able to re-construct a visual scenario from the bottom-up, but this is not the primordial level of perception. The perceptual holism I am advocating is thus of a very dynamic sort. We are always already involved with the way everything plays together and is interwoven, just like we are already unified and synergetic, embodied powers. It is in this context that Merleau-Ponty points to the advance made when they started to paint the reflection of light in the eyes of their subjects, which inevitably lead to the whole portrayed face lighting up with life, which radically changed the way the qualities of the painted face interplayed – it did not just add a sparkle to the eyes (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 322).

If it were a matter solely of which qualities pertain to an object and not the way they interplay, then a sense data theorist like Bertrand Russell

would be right in his insistence on completely detached perception revealing the fundamental building blocks of for instance vision. Russell, when attempting to thoroughly describe what perceiving a brown, square table “actually” looks like, insists that there really is nothing but an infinity of different variations of brown *sense data* or *qualia* accompanied by an arbitrary perspective on the shape of the table that changes all the time with no necessary connection between any of the percepts (Russell 2007: 11-21). The problem with Russell’s approach is that in detaching the color or shape from the total bodily signification of the table, the table as a perceptual phenomenon breaks apart. By disentangling the symbolism and its qualities, we do not reach a more fundamental layer of perception, but an artificial and abstract one.

For Merleau-Ponty, we do not primordially have detached qualia when perceiving; rather, perception is from the beginning holistic and thus involved with the way each quality saturates the rest of the phenomenon. The brown of a perceived table is immediately a heavy brown, entwined with a whole array of potential sounds, a hardness, et cetera; in summary: a total bodily signification. Importantly, this is not an intellectual achievement. I am not first presented with a brown, square visual phenomenon, and then afterwards from this I infer hardness or sound-potential. I perceive with my whole body as a single, unified and synergetic power; inevitably having each quality of a thing affect the perception of the rest. For instance, the total perception of a table is very different for a deaf person due to a lack of synergy between sound and the rest of the table’s qualities.

Consider in this context Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the perception of the color of a carpet:

The ‘real’ is the insurmountable plenitude: it is impossible to describe fully the color of a carpet without saying that it is a carpet, or a woolen carpet, and

without implying in this color a certain tactile value, a certain weight, and a certain resistance to sound. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 337)

The qualities Merleau-Ponty bring in as essentially wound up with the perception of the color of a carpet must not be understood as determinate values – but bodily significations (or “virtual values”). The red of the color is not saturated by objectively weighing five kilos: It is not a five-kilo-red. The weight of the carpet is the lived significance it has for us as embodied subjects with a meaningful relation to weight, which invites a certain bodily affection of me.⁶ Let us now turn to the relation between perceiver and perceived.

Part 3: Communion

There is evidently a strong isomorphism between perceiver as an embodied power and perceived as a thing with its own interwoven unity in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Just like our senses entwine and saturate each other, so too the qualities of a perceived object interplay and live in its symbolism. Indeed, the holistic nature of both our perception and of perceived objects are essentially bound together.

[...] the thing is the correlate of my body and, more generally, of my existence of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. The thing is constituted in the hold my body has upon it; it is not at first a signification for the understanding, but rather a structure available for inspection by the body. And if we want to describe the real such as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it burdened with anthropological predicates. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 334)

But, what does this hold of the body amount to? To answer this, we need to return and look closer at Merleau-Ponty’s account of sensation, and more precisely, to what we might mistakenly believe to be visual “simples”. For

⁶ For a broader discussion of determinate versus indeterminate values in perception, I refer the reader to (Kelly 2004) and (Kelly 2007).

Merleau-Ponty, even something as “pure” as color-sensation already holds within it a bodily signification; that is, it carries with itself a certain kind of bodily affectation or *attitude* (ibid.: 222). Red is never just a visual sensation, but something we perceive and take up with our whole bodily being. This goes hand in hand with the view of objects and perception that we have already explored. This might sound somewhat peculiar. Luckily, Merleau-Ponty brings up a clarifying analogy to highlight this symbiotic structure between perceiver and perceived object:

Consider lying in your bed and trying to fall asleep. We might in this analogy label sleep as the “object” towards which we are trying to comport ourselves. Reaching this object (falling asleep) is not a purely passive event whereby at 11 PM I automatically fall asleep without any involvement on the personal side, but nor is it something I am entirely in control of intellectually. I do not think myself to sleep – indeed, thinking too much tends to interfere more than assist the drowsy. Falling asleep usually requires of me to take up a certain bodily attitude where I pace my breathing, adjust my position, let my mind wander to certain events whereby I feel calm or relaxed, or perhaps empty my mind altogether, and so on. By adopting this way of being, sleep may finally overwhelm me (ibid.: 219). While this is a very clear case of bodily signification and comportment, structurally it differs from normal perception only in its explicitness.

Even visually “simple” phenomena, such as red, are meshed with a whole range of bodily significations and potential symbolisms. Colors *feel* like something, affect us, and invite us to adopt certain bodily attitudes, depending on our activity, much the same way as the case of falling asleep does. Backtracking to the points on synesthesia, it is not that a color reminds us of some, abstract poetic attributes; rather, a color *is* these attributes. This is why non-synesthetes describing music as color were able to assign colors to the music in a meaningful way to begin with. Merleau-

Ponty refers to this event of bodily involvement with the perceived situation as a *communion* (ibid.: 219)⁷: “To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention and as a coupling of our body with the things” (ibid.: 334).

It is via communion that life is breathed into everything perceived and whereby the perceived is imbued with its flux of bodily significations or its symbolism. We are, Merleau-Ponty insists, like the heart that imbues the whole organism with life; but without both organism and heart, no life can be imbued at all. The keen observer will have noticed that the discussion vis-à-vis internalism versus externalism lurks in the background of the last chapters: Have I really discussed the perceived *object* itself? Is this not just conflating perception and perceived? It is, however, important to remember that the phenomenologist approaches the issue differently and cannot start out by assuming a split between subject and object. From Husserl and onwards to Merleau-Ponty, she learns to let go of this division and to see the perceptual phenomenon as an integrated whole where what we naturally label “internal” and “external” must first be more precisely understood by means of its givenness.

Because of the holistic structure of synergy and symbolism, we reach real things or objects. These, as we saw, do not have to be physical or spatial things. Depending on what we are involved with, different symbolisms and bodily significations might interplay, like love in roses or color in music, but even then, there is already a unity to the perceived via its symbolism and its communion with us as synergetic powers. Objects get their unity, and thus, at least partly, their identity because of the way

⁷ A reason why music allows for such explicit tendencies across synesthetes and non-synesthetes alike might have to do with the high degree of whole-body involvement and feeling music carries with it. This is evident in all the very different bodily and relevant sensorial activities we have that center around and express music.

their symbolism invites certain bodily involvements and attitudes from us which thus sets them apart from the rest of the perceived field.

Perception and holism

By exploring both phenomenological and empirical points, I have attempted to stress the holistic nature of perception and its relevance for the problem of segregation and identity in visual perception, as well as any account of the general nature of perception.

If we conceive of any perceived object primarily as a substance-like *thing* that bears *qualities*, or simply just as *that very bundle of qualities*, we simply misrepresent it just like we misrepresent perception if we view it as initially modularized. In perceiving, I always reach out with my whole body towards something that speaks to me and with which I enter a communion as an embodied someone.

I have throughout the essay tried to highlight the danger of disregarding the holistic and dynamic nature of perception, and instead I have encouraged its importance. By conceiving of the basic level of perception as already holistic, a whole new array of questions and answers are opened up and, indeed, embracing a much more holistic view of perception, I would argue, is a key step if we really wish to fully understand embodiment as well as cognition and mind altogether.

Litteraturliste

- Cytowic, R. E. (1995): "Synesthesia: Phenomenology And Neuropsychology; A Review of Current Knowledge", *PSYCHE*, 2(10).
- Cytowic, R.E. & Eagleman, D.M. (2009): *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia*, London: MIT-Press.
- Dreyfus, H. (2004): "Merleau-Ponty and Recent Cognitive Science", I T. Carman, & M. B. Hansen (Red.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, s. 129-150.
- Dreyfus, H. (2007): "Reply To Romdenh-Romluc", I T. Baldwin, *Reading Merleau-Ponty - On the Phenomenology of Perception*, London & New York, Routledge, s. 72-82.
- Fodor, J. A. (1983): *Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Frege, G. (1951). "On Concept and Object", oversat af P. Geach, & M. Black, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Mind Association.
- Husserl, E. (1973): *Ding und Raum: Vorlesungen 1907*, The Hague, Ulrich Claesges.
- Kelly, S. D. (2004): "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty", I T. Carman, & M. B. Hansen (Red.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, s. 74-110.
- Kelly, S. D. (2007): "What Do We See (When We Do?)", I T. Baldwin, *Reading Merleau-Ponty - On the Phenomenology of Perception*, London & New York, Routledge, s. 23-56.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003): *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012): *Phenomenology of Perception*. Oxon, Routledge.

- Noë, A. (2004): *Action in Perception*, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Palmer, S. E., Langlois, T. A., & Schloss, K. B. (2015): “Music-to-color associations of single-line piano melodies in non-synesthetes”, *Multisensory Research*.
- Palmer, S. E., Schloss, K. B., Xu, Z., & Prado-Legon, L. R. (2013): “Music-color associations are mediated by emotion”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110, s. 8836-8841.
- Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2007): “Merleau-Ponty And The Power To Reckon With The Possible”, I T. Baldwin, *Reading Merleau-Ponty - On the Phenomenology of Perception*, London & New York, Routledge, s. 44-58.
- Russell, B. (2007): *The Problems of Philosophy*, Cosmico Classics. 8, 26/04/2012. s. 8.