

SEEING BETTER ON THE LEVEL OF LAMPS:  
PERCEPTUAL NORMATIVITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY

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PERCEPTUAL NORMATIVITY IN MERLEAU-PONTY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis develops an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological conception of perceptual normativity, that is, how there are norms, internal to perception itself, governing our everyday perceptual involvements with the world. I argue that Merleau-Ponty conceives perceptual norms as being gestalt-structural forms of 'original sense', which we experience pre-reflectively in a direct, bodily way. I motivate my interpretation by examining a passage in *Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty remarks on how perception tends toward an optimal or better view of things, indicating a normative dimension in perception. I make sense of this passage in relation to Merleau-Ponty's wider gestalt-ontological thought about embodied subjectivity. I unpack how, via the basic intentional structure of perspective by which subject is geared into the perceptual world, body-subject adopts an 'original sense' or 'look', which undergoes an open process of definition that is experienced as normative. This account can further clarify some questions Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly address about our lived experience of perceptual norms: namely, how perceptual norms are temporal and contingent in their hold on body, and how these norms integrate the subject's perceptual interests. I further investigate how perceptual norms, in the context of Merleau-Ponty's thought, are perceived in a two-fold or ambiguous way: the subject lives norms immediately from the 'inside', but can also adopt a perspective on norms. In so doing, the subject can perceive the norm itself from the 'outside,' which is to partially 'free' body from the world's normative grip. This interpretation is presented as a response to a debate in the literature involving Sean Kelly, Corinne Lajoie, and Samantha Matherne on how Merleau-Ponty conceives perceptual normativity.

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*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.  
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*

–Psalm 119:103-105 ESV

*Socrates: Then that was a grand idea of yours when you told us that knowledge is nothing more or less than perception. So we find the various theories have converged to the same thing: that of Homer and Heraclitus and all their tribe, that all things flow like streams; of Protagoras, wisest of men, that man is the measure of all things; and of Theaetetus that, these things being so, knowledge proves to be perception. What about it, Theaetetus? Shall we say we have here your first-born child, the result of my midwifery? Or what would you say?*

–Plato, *Theaetetus*, 160d-e

*A dwelling in the light, which Prometheus in Aeschylus designated as one of the greatest boons, by means of which he made the savage into a human being, ceases to exist for the worker. Light, air, etc. – the simplest animal cleanliness – ceases to be a need for man.*

–Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Normativity has traditionally been conceived to pertain to the domain of ethics, or moral theory. However, recently it has been appreciated that there are norms, of many kinds, that govern a broad range of human activity beyond the moral sphere. Social behaviour in general has a normative dimension, if seen in relation to rules or conventions that encourage or discourage certain forms of behaviour. A family might have norms for the activity of having dinner together—table manners—that a guest will perhaps experience themselves to be constrained or judged by. Schools evaluate students' academic performance according to certain norms which are defined by the institution, to some degree of formal explication.

The question has been posed as to whether perception is somehow normative, that is, whether there are norms that govern how our ordinary, everyday perceptual interactions with the world unfold, and which are internal to the process of perception itself. The answer to this question will likely depend on the kind of view of perception that one holds. In this thesis, I will be primarily concerned with the view of perception held by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. My aim is to defend how I think this particular philosophical conception of perception fits with Merleau-Ponty's claim that perception is normative. That said, Merleau-Ponty's characteristic style of argument for his view of perception addresses multiple schools of thought on perception, and his ideas are of increasing interest in the field of contemporary philosophical work on perception. For contextualization purposes, I will try to outline a few of these connections as I introduce the main focus of this thesis work.

The question of whether perception is somehow normative could be posed as follows, for instance. When I (as generic subject) look at my red scarf, do I perceive according to a norm that

guides me in correctly determining the particular quality of the red—distinct from that other colour, red-orange, on my other, otherwise identical scarf?

If we suspect that there may be a norm governing how the subject sees the red scarf, we could entertain the following line of questioning as to the basis of the normativity. We could ask: is this norm a determinate feature of the objective world of scientific study? The physicist might be inclined to look for a norm corresponding to a wavelength of light or other physical property in the scarf or my retina. Such a norm might be measurable quantitatively. The cognitive scientist, on the other hand, might look for a physiological basis for normativity at the level either of neural activity in the subject's brain, or of sensory-cognitive processing involved in the event of seeing the red scarf.

Or, alternatively, one could look for a basis of perceptual normativity in the contribution made to perception by some feature of subject's mind, such as psychological laws or logical rules that might apply to structure perceptual experience. Here, we ask: could the norm be somehow based on the individual subject's mental states or mental activity in connection to perception? If the norm is subjective, would any guarantee have it that other subjects in the same context would see the red scarf the same way, and thereby be able to distinguish the two scarves by colour, due to the norm?

While the possibilities may perhaps be there, for the purposes of this thesis I will not be dealing with perceptual normativity understood either as a psychological or physiological phenomenon. My reasons for avoiding this kind of approach are tied to a central criticism Merleau-Ponty makes, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of what he calls 'objective thinking.' Empiricist psychology, physiology, cognitive science, and physics, he would say, all operate based on certain ontological assumptions or prejudices about the world in which perception takes

place. Empiricism in hand with scientific thought, says Merleau-Ponty, typically assumes that the world is made up of disparate objects possessing determinate properties, which exist independently of mind (Merleau-Ponty refers to this prejudice as '*le préjugé du monde*'). Typically, on this kind of view, these objects might be known by the subject who can equip himself with the right instruments or methods of investigation—scientific methods, likely—that will be used to make the measurement, or to garner the right empirical evidence to support a hypothesis about objective reality. Such a project will aim at an outlook on the world that is free of subjective bias, and free of ambiguity. In other words, the scientific project is posed as a way of correcting our perceptual experience of the world in order to get at how the world really is, independently of our involvement in it. Its methods are put forth as needed in order to mitigate the errors our unmediated senses tend to fall into while perceiving the world directly. The subject must use science, or some other privileged intellectual activity, to elevate their understanding to the level of objectivity as set by the standard of the world in-itself, so to speak.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty says that the Kantian idealist will also make assumptions about the world prior to perception, except that he will attribute any objectivity of perceptual phenomena not to the world in-itself, but to intellectual operations performed by the subject. On such an account, the subject's rational mind is brought to experience to actively process raw sensuous material into a particular perception of a thing through an act of perceptual judgment (and perhaps also an act of conceptual judgment, if the categories of the understanding are further applied to the phenomenon in question). On this picture, mind possesses universal and necessary *a priori* forms that elevate the sensible world to the status of intelligible objective reality in representational thought, when perceptual experience is at its best. An example of a contemporary philosophical view of perception comparable to this is the conceptualism of John

McDowell.<sup>1</sup> This is a neo-Kantian account based on the tenet that the human subject's rational capacities are the source of perceptual sense and conceptually structure all human experience, including the perception of red scarves.

Merleau-Ponty's idea is that these modes of objective thinking, by granting the status of objectivity exclusively to either conceptualized mental contents or empirical world in-itself, foster a pattern of erroneous thinking wherein we take what is already found in reflecting upon our *perceptual* experience—the objective world we see before us—and claim that this is what existed in the real world all along. A well-known illustration of this kind of error (sometimes referred to as the 'experience error') goes as follows: if I open the refrigerator door and see that the light is on inside, I am incorrect to think that the light is always on inside the fridge. If the relationship of involvement between subject and fridge (that the subject opens the fridge sometimes, which turns on the light in the fridge, and even that a subject designed the fridge a certain way) is not taken into account as having shaped the sense of the perceptual experience, then the subject might mistakenly project the result of what they see onto their notion of a subject-independent world. When what we perceptually experience, the objective world, is read back into the world in this way, what will go wrong in particular is that we mischaracterize the structure of perception itself.

Objective thinking falls into this kind of error, Merleau-Ponty says, and ultimately ends up falsifying perceptual experience itself. In this way, the modern scientific consciousness ends up assuming that for objective validity, mediation is needed between self and world (typically, mediation through the scientific method or through mental representations), while denying this mediating role to the body. In this way, such a scientific consciousness ends up denying

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

perception its own kind of direct hold on meaning, or its own internal means of getting perception ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. We on the one hand expect that perception on its own would only give us only a parade of confused appearances, and then on the other, deny that the stable world of perceptual sense that stands immediately before us could be the result of perception alone. (And yet, the flexible stability of the world we directly perceive is relied upon for everyday inhabitation of the world.)

I will spend sections of this thesis presenting Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of perception in further depth, but it will be helpful to introduce some basics here. Counter to tradition, Merleau-Ponty finds the characteristic structure of perception to be the spontaneous organization of perceived phenomena themselves, unfolding temporally. He conceives these perceptual structures as gestalt forms (which he claims are ontologically basic), adapting this notion from the Gestalt psychologists whom he was much influenced by. Hence, the phenomena we perceive are already formed with a sense when we meet them (Merleau-Ponty refers to this sense as a ‘nascent logos’, suggesting a pre-conceptual rationality in the phenomena themselves). This sense is meaningful for the subject’s life projects—it is subjective—and yet it does not require any intellectual work on the part of the perceiving subject to be grasped.<sup>2</sup> This perceptual sense

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<sup>2</sup> Some Merleau-Pontyan terminology needs clarification here. I will use the words ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ interchangeably, in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s thought and when describing perception. Merleau-Ponty deliberately preserves the ambiguity of the French word *sens*, which can be translated as orientation, direction, or sense. For this thesis, both meaning and sense are terms used for perceived phenomena (and for the relation of perceptual involvement, which is ‘meaningful’ or a ‘means’ of sense) to emphasize that the phenomena of the world we perceive are subjective, in that they refer to the subject’s life projects. We perceive, for Merleau-Ponty, from the point of view of a subject—hence what we perceive is said to be meaningful or to make *sense* for that subject. (Additionally, these meaningful phenomena we perceive consist in gestalt form or structures, which are ontologically basic from this subjective or lived point of view. These forms appear as sense, or meaning, to the subject.)

It will be helpful to understand that Merleau-Ponty thinks of the human being as an object (entirely a part of the material world, which is the sense in which it is embodied) that also is alive. The human being is a living body, or in other words a biological organism, in virtue of having organs of sense that respond to the environment (I prefer the word ‘environment’ to ‘world’ when describing the human being biologically). Being able to respond to the environment allows the human being to make demands on the world for what will

includes indeterminacies and ambiguities which arise from the structure of embodied perception itself. The phenomenal field, in which sense appears, is a concept Merleau-Ponty adapts from the Gestalt psychologists to explain how such multiplicities and ambiguities of meaning are sustained in the world (I sometimes will refer to it as the world of perception, or the world of perceptual sense). Neither the objective world of empiricism, nor the transcendental field of Cartesian, Kantian, or Husserlian idealism, is inhabitable in such an embodied way. Perceptual subject is intertwined in meaningful relations in the phenomenal field via their embodiment. Perception, in the Merleau-Pontyan context, should be thought of as an internal relation, lived from the point of view of the subject who is directed toward the field in virtue of being a living body, which is always a meaningful relation to phenomena.

The figure-ground structure is another Gestalt psychological notion (originally just pertaining to visual perceptions) that is taken up by Merleau-Ponty for characterizing the basic structure of perception. The figure-ground structure is used by Merleau-Ponty, integrated with the Husserlian notion of the object-horizon intentional structuration of sense, to conceive of *embodied perspective* as the basic perceptual structure by which the human subject has experience. In this necessarily perspectival way of intending sense, a focal perceptual form (or, to introduce more

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satisfy her internal needs for life. This 'inside' point of view on the human being, from which the subject experiences needs, wants, and desires in relation to life purposes, is the point of view of a subject. Subjectivity, then, is an internal directedness of the body toward the world, for the purposes of life; the subject is defined by life projects, and such involvements are the way in which the subject is (in this internal sense) related to the world. The subjective view refers to the point of view from which we live, or in other words move meaningfully and communicate vitally in the world.

Merleau-Ponty thinks this subjective point of view is fundamental with respect to the point of view on the human being as object in the world, governed by general laws of physics and chemistry. The reason for this is that the human being first needs lived experience, which is subjective and makes reference to life, before developing the means of taking the 'outside', or objective, scientific view on the world. Science is primarily a meaningful life project of the human subjectivity; it is subjective in origin while purporting objectivity. In this kind of way, Merleau-Ponty thinks that all consciousness, even that engaged in science, is perceptual consciousness in that it is fundamentally seen 'from the inside'. This background was helpfully sketched in an introductory text to Merleau-Ponty's ideas by Eric Mathews called *Merleau-Ponty: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 47-53.

overlapping Merleau-Pontyan terminology, the *object* of perception) appears to subject likewise to a figure on a ground.<sup>3</sup> The focal object appears not in isolation, but as part of a phenomenal field of which subject is also a part; that is, the object we see appears to the subject's point of view along with a *horizon* of indeterminate perceptual meanings that refer to it, and which show other possible perspectives one could adopt on the object. Such horizontal meanings can be said to play a 'background' role in the structure of perception, relative to the focal object of sense the subject has a perspective on.

Embodied being-in-the-world, through the structure of perspective, is the means by which we are open to the world's disclosure of perceptual meaning in the first place. However, such a structure necessitates a limitation on the project of coming to a complete or objectively

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of Merleau-Ponty, I take intentionality to mean the body-subject's directedness toward the phenomenal field. Intentionality is direct and immediate, on this account. Once I discuss the gestalt-structural basis for intentional unities of original sense in Chapter 2, it will be further clarified how we can say that the intending is 'direct' and unmediated by representations or mental contents (Merleau-Ponty is a direct realist, in fact). The intending is also meant in the sense of 'direction', which reminds us that the intending is meaningful with respect to the life project of the subject (that is, to the subject insofar as they are a biological organism and not just insofar as they possess any higher kind of 'consciousness').

The fact that this intentionality is bodily, for Merleau-Ponty, distinguishes the concept from that of Husserl or Kant, who use the term intentionality to mean a binary relation of directedness of consciousness to object of consciousness (a phenomenon, or the thing as it appears to the subject). Husserl and Kant would then say that the subject is 'conscious' of the intended phenomenon, as in explicitly mentally aware of it and capable of thematizing it. For Merleau-Ponty's embodied consciousness of sense, it will not be the case that the subject is explicitly mentally aware or conscious of what they bodily intend. In the structure of perspective, body intends a focal object of sense along with a horizon of indeterminate sense, by which the intention is *embedded* in the world (related to the phenomenal field as a whole and its parts, directly). Thus, when I pick up my book, I am bodily-intending not only the focal book, but also the various meanings that refer to my relation to the book: the chair my body sits in, the lighting in the room which conditions how I hold the book, the meanings involved in what the book is about, and so on. The latter are bodily intended by perceptual consciousness, and yet the subject is not 'conscious' of them the same way as the concrete book itself: we say these senses presently feature on the background of intentional structure (and any of them can shift into the foreground, if my perspective shifts). Still, the subject intends or 'sees' these horizontal meanings, and yet this sense (as will become clearer in the upcoming chapters) is *indeterminate* from their point of view.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodily intentionality is at times articulated as being an operative-intentionality (an orientation toward the world as possible meanings of practical involvement for the subject), a motor-intentionality (an orientation toward the world as possible meanings in relation to the subject's mobility or ability to move through the world, which is closely related to the kinesthetic intentionality discussed more contemporarily). The consciousness involved in these intentions is clearly not 'conscious' of what they intend in the usual sense of explicit mental awareness.

determinate sense of any meaningful part of the world. The background of perception, or in other words the horizon of indeterminate meaning by which a focal perceptual sense comes into view, must recede in order for the intended sense to figure in our view—this is perspectivity, which for Merleau-Ponty is the characteristically human way of intending the world.

We can preliminarily see how, on such a characterization of perception, the subject does not need to elevate raw sensory material to the status of concepts in a conceptual framework when perceiving a red scarf; nor does the subject need to elevate themselves to the objectivity of the world in-itself through scientific methodological devices, in order to perceive a red scarf properly. As this thesis will develop, it is in virtue of the embodied perceptual structures that the subject is, so to speak, already situated on the *level* of the things seen, which is the phenomenal field in which life takes place as a vital communication with the world. That is, it is in virtue of embodied subjectivity as a basic means of being in the world that we are meaningfully related to perceptual objects already, without the need for science or concepts to make sense of our perceptual experience.

Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights about embodied perception, wherein perspectival perception is the characteristic way humans exist in relation to the world, we can ask if this basic structure of perception itself might base a perceptual normativity. Here we are in the territory of perceptual normativity as is the focus of this thesis, wherein I am examining how perceptual norms are understood in the phenomenology of perception of Merleau-Ponty.

Thus, in this thesis I will be approaching the question of perceptual normativity from the outlook of the existential phenomenologist. Specifically, I will be working closely to Merleau-Ponty's method in *The Structure of Behaviour* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as with the approaches of a few contemporary phenomenologists who are influenced by Merleau-Ponty.

These philosophers have in common the project of revealing what the nature of our direct perceptual experience is really like, with the intention of setting aside such ontological assumptions mentioned earlier about what objectively exists in the world. This approach allows for a disengagement from questions concerning the physiological and psychological necessary conditions of embodied perceptual experience (although certainly, for Merleau-Ponty, there are such necessary conditions for perceptual experience), in favour of examining the existential or lived conditions of perceptual experience.<sup>4</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, this entails a look to the basic structures of embodied existence that allow for perceptual experience. With such an orientation

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<sup>4</sup> At this point I will clarify some methodological terminology that will be used throughout the thesis. By existential conditions of experience, I am making reference to the approach originally conceived by Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, of uncovering the original experiences that make other kinds of experience possible. (Heidegger would say we have these original experiences in virtue of being subjects primordially open to the world, which roughly means intimately involved with the world in a way that is typically pre-conscious, or in other words tacit or hidden from consciousness, in order to make possible other modes of explicit consciousness.) By emphasizing *lived* existential conditions in the Merleau-Pontyan context, the intent is to bring out the sense that for Merleau-Ponty, such original experiences are perceptual, i.e. those of an embodied subjectivity directly involved in the world, meaningfully, as life-project.

Perceptual experience is what makes possible consciousness of scientific objects, for instance—so we say perceptual experience is the lived existential condition of the scientific project. While doing science or indulging our capacity to ‘reason’, the sense that we are primarily *perceptual* consciousness, involved with the world of scientific meaning as embodied subjects, is often not conscious or explicitly given in experience in the same way that the meaning of the scientific task itself is. As described earlier, scientific consciousness (or likewise the consciousness that takes itself to be operating on mental contents via concepts, or likewise the Cartesian consciousness that takes itself to be ‘reflecting’ on the world) tends to the pitfalls of objective thinking. That is, the subject tends to project objectivity onto the world, and the original perceptual experience making such consciousness possible becomes hidden. Because of this, contemporary phenomenologists would speak of embodied perceptual subjectivity as a ‘background’ existential and lived condition of this kind of experience had in projects whose aim is objectivity. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology would be seeking to uncover this background. Also, it is in this sense that I will sometimes refer to embodied perceptual experience as ‘pre-reflective’, ‘pre-conceptual’, ‘pre-cognitive’, ‘pre-representational’, ‘pre-thetic’, ‘pre-conscious’ or ‘pre-objective’. *Pre* does not mean *non*, but rather emphasizes that the experience referred to is an original experience, often hidden in the background from the later form of consciousness that understands itself to be engaged in the activities of reflecting, conceptualizing, intending an object, operating on mental representations, formulating a thesis, or cognizing. All of these modes of consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, are only possible modes of consciousness because consciousness is originally perceptual.

It is also worth noting that this approach of uncovering lived, existential conditions of experience can be distinguished from the Kantian or Husserlian phenomenological approach of finding transcendental conditions required to make experience logically or scientifically possible. The structures of perception, for Merleau-Ponty, are considered both transcendent and immanent, since the subject is embodied (the subject is in, or part of the world) and meaningfully directed beyond itself in existence (a transcendence). I will further unpack this metaphysical background of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in Chapter 2.

to the question of perceptual normativity, we stand to gain an understanding of how, if we do experience our everyday perceptual interactions with the world to have a normative dimension, this experience of normativity might be rooted in the most basic structures of human existence. We could view such a normativity as conditioning human subjectivity in the existential sense of being a kind of original experience of the world, in virtue of which we are open to further possibilities of human experience and activity, for instance of a scientific or formal linguistic kind. From the point of view of the existential phenomenologist, such conditions typically go unnoticed by the consciousness who tends toward the objective thinking mentioned earlier. However, we suspect that rather than having disappeared from the phenomenal field, the experience of perceptual norms can be found hiding in the backgrounds of our lives, so to speak.

An assertion of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception which has been influential in the contemporary literature, and which has arisen in recent discussions of phenomenologists and philosophers of mind alike, is that perception, indeed, is itself normative in this lived, pre-objective sense.<sup>5</sup> That is, Merleau-Ponty thinks we can specify an experience of normativity in perception, and that there exist perceptual norms based on the basic structures of perception that compose our perceptual experience. As I will discuss, we experience such norms as guiding our perceptions, in a direct bodily-intentional way, toward the 'better' or 'optimal' view relative to our current view of a phenomenon. I argue that this is best made sense of as being a (normative) process of perceptual definition, through the structure of embodied perspective. How so, or what precisely these norms are, is the question this thesis attempts to clarify in the context of Merleau-

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<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that Husserl and Heidegger also hold the view that perception is normative. Cf. Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Recent contemporary work on perceptual normativity across the fields of philosophy of mind, philosophy of perception, and phenomenology are compiled in *Normativity in Perception*, ed. Maxime Doyon and Thiemo Breyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Ponty's thought. Doing so will require a look at Merleau-Ponty's wider thought about perception. In particular my argument will require an understanding of his conception of the gestalt-structuration of (or, the formation of) original unities of perceptual sense, which are the entities my interpretation identifies as playing the role of perceptual norm.

As I will aim to show (and as I think commentators do not heed consistently enough), Merleau-Ponty's is a pre-objective sense of perceptual normativity that departs from the commonplace philosophical notion of a norm as, say, external standard against which we can measure our own behaviour in some mental act of comparison. Merleau-Ponty would say that such familiar and culturally entrenched conceptions of normativity are likely to be implicated in the same habitual mistake of objective thinking, that is, that we would purport to base normativity on an objective or inter-subjective world (assumed to exist either in-itself, or as mental forms of judgment), whilst overlooking subject's condition of embodied being in the world, by which experience of the world is originally lived. Thus, such conceptions of normativity would likely overlook the original foundation of normativity on the lived structures of embodied perceptual consciousness, which are inherently ambiguous, contingent, and non-universalizable.

Thus, unlike traditional notions of normativity, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of normativity is one which aims to bring to light the world of perceptual meaning accessed by the embodied subject. How Merleau-Ponty understands perceptual normativity is a complicated interpretive question, however, given that perceptual normativity is mentioned by Merleau-Ponty only in difficult-to-comprehend, passing reference, with what we can expect to be a novel and modified use of terminology.

At this very point, I can sketch some features of how I think perceptual norms function, in Merleau-Ponty's thought. But first, it is important to recognize that Merleau-Ponty's interest in looking at perceptual experience is specifically directed to the ordinary experiences of everyday life, wherein human subjects are neither introspecting subjects disengaged from the world, nor detached scientific onlookers measuring the objective world. While he would qualify such activities as perceptual, Merleau-Ponty will look, rather, at the perceptual subject who is absorbed into meaningful life projects and engaged with the things of the world.<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty's subject is engaged with reading a book, driving a car, or wearing a scarf. Perception, on Merleau-Ponty's account, must be emphatically seen as a subject's relation with a meaningful cultural world of which they are a part. Since subject is meaningfully related to sense, which are gestalt-forms in the phenomenal field, body is part of the perceptual structure and the subject is related internally (or, directly) to what is sensed.

I will use the red scarf example to introduce how I see norms as functioning, for Merleau-Ponty. A *perceptual* norm that grants me my scarf's colour red, on my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of perceptual normativity, would appear to 'guide' embodied perception toward a 'better view' that I seek in my scarf-wearing engagement with the world (these are terms Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the experience of normativity). The norm, I argue, can be understood as being based on the perceptual unity or whole that is the structural means of existence of embodied subject's meaningful involvement with the red scarf. Such a perceptual unity is a particular gestalt (or, form, structure) in the phenomenal field of meaning in which I live—it directly relates me and my scarf which I wear around, say. On this account, the norm

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<sup>6</sup> Some expressions commonly used by Merleau-Ponty or his commentators to describe the subject's perception of sense are 'engagement', 'involvement' or 'absorbed coping.' These emphasize the fact that Merleau-Ponty wants to depict the everyday experience of the subject who is directly related to the perceived sense as a life project.

would depend both on subject's self-interests in perceiving the red of the scarf, and what are any notable 'properties' of the scarf—its redness, texture, and length, say—while being irreducible to either. Such a norm is lived by an embodied subject (that is, it appears to the subject's point of view), and hence is ambiguous and indeterminate in appearance. As we will better understand, such a norm is inseparable from the subject's personal history with the scarf or scarves in question, and from the subject's way of wearing or handling it.

It is important to note, again, that traditional theories of perception would be conceiving of perception quite differently from Merleau-Ponty's approach. In addition, the theories of perception which Merleau-Ponty critiques would likely answer the question of whether perception is normative in the negative. As mentioned already, throughout most of the history of philosophy up to Merleau-Ponty, theories of perception have tended to be polarized to one of two directions (in Merleau-Ponty's characteristic argumentative style in *Phenomenology of Perception*, these views serve as opposing theses in relation to which Merleau-Ponty's own view is constructed likewise to being a dialectical synthesis of the two). The first classic view of perception depicted by Merleau-Ponty is that mind-independent world is comprised of the determinate entities that causally impact our sense organs to produce sensations, which mind then passively associates or bundles, in the perception of ordinary things. For Merleau-Ponty, this represents the realist or empiricist view (or, as sometimes referred to, the associationist psychological view) of perception.

The alternative extreme is the view that in perception, mind actively operates on the material of sensation and objectively determines perceptual unities making up the world—red scarf and red-orange scarf— through acts of judgment. Such constituting acts are governed by rational rules that must be logically prior to experience, rather than being part of perceptual experience

itself. This represents what Merleau-Ponty calls the idealist or intellectualist view of perception. The intellectualist view is meant with Kant's framework in mind (albeit a particular and perhaps simplified interpretation of Kant that Merleau-Ponty found useful to his arguments).

Both accounts imply that there is no norm internal to perception itself. In the empiricist case, there are no norms or standards by which we perceive, but only relations of constant association between sensations that arrive to consciousness through the oft-occurring coincidence of different causal interactions at different points on my body. In this kind of view, the perception of the scarf would be reducible to some number of one-to-one correspondences between stimuli of a mind-independent external reality which my sense organs are habitually open to, and 'ideas' or 'sensations' produced by the impingements on my sense organs.

In the intellectualist case, where a perception is the result of independent constituting activity of mind on meaningless sensory given, any achievement of objective validity in the perceived world would be the result of necessary *a priori* forms being transcendently imposed on the content of sensual experience.<sup>7</sup> Such formal features are not evident to perception itself nor supplied by the phenomena; they are logically prior to perceptual experience and thus are not *perceptual* norms of any kind. They are transcendental as opposed to internal to lived perception, we could say.

My overall aim in this thesis is to defend my own interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perceptual normativity, which I present against a backdrop of attempts made to deal with this problem by Merleau-Ponty scholars who are contemporary phenomenologists. The thesis is organized as follows. In Chapter 1, I present a particular close-knit debate among

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here, however, that Kant's theory of colour perception might complicate this particular example I am using of the experience of seeing the colour red. In a conceptual judgment, the experience of red would not be a feature of the object, scarf, that is contributed to experience in virtue of the categories.

commentators—Sean Kelly, Corinne Lajoie and Samantha Matherne—about how Merleau-Ponty conceives perceptual normativity.

My contribution to this debate is developed in Chapter 2, where I argue that we must understand Merleau-Ponty's novel, phenomenal conception of perceptual normativity in relation to his gestalt-ontological thinking about embodied subjectivity. The normativity phenomenon Merleau-Ponty is referring to, I will show, is significant of the fact that Merleau-Ponty thinks that perception, and hence meaningful human being-in-the-world and characteristically human existence, is fundamentally rooted in what I will describe as his notion of perceptual unities of 'original sense.' These are embodied (as opposed to ideal) unities of sense that are open to a horizon of related meanings, and in a temporal process of definition. As I will further explain, these are taken up by the subject according to the object-horizon structuration of perception that is embodied perspective, where they play an ambiguous structural role in experience *as perceptual norm*. Such perceptual norms, I argue, are temporal and lived, and dependent on (but not reducible to) the body-subject's interests—this is a claim that is made in the existing debate, but not well comprehended in relation to Merleau-Ponty's wider thought.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how my interpretation addresses specific conceptual and interpretive problems that I will have pointed out in the existing debate. First, I defend Kelly on his reading of an ambiguous passage of the text, based on my own interpretation of perceptual norms. From this, I argue that all three commentators get two major notions about perceptual normativity incorrect, in their interpretations of Merleau-Ponty. Firstly, I argue that perceptual norms can indeed be perceived in a virtual sense (which for Merleau-Ponty, means as a possibility for meaningful perceptual involvement among other possibilities). This allows me to relate my interpretation to Merleau-Ponty's notion of situated freedom, and also to specify how I think

perceptual norms would be perceived in a two-fold or ambiguous way, in Merleau-Ponty's thought. I argue that all three commentators miss this ambiguity, which amounts to problems in the way they conceive normativity. This work, I hope, serves to sharpen the focus on what it would mean to make the claim that perception is normative, or in other words that we perceive according to perceptual norms—and furthermore, that we can perceive and even freely take up the norms themselves, as a lived condition of human experience.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROBLEM OF PERCEPTUAL NORMATIVITY AND THE EXISTING DEBATE

My goal in this first chapter is to lay out what I think is the essential thread of a debate among commentators—Sean Kelly, Corinne Lajoie, and Samantha Matherne—on Merleau-Ponty’s conception of perceptual normativity. I aim to make clear the debate’s core issues and areas of difficulty. This will provide a clear sense of the interpretive task at hand, framing the existing debate that I see myself contributing to. My own position on the question of how Merleau-Ponty understands perceptual normativity is one that I will put forth and defend in the next chapter. In Chapter 3, I return to specifying how my interpretation fits into the existing debate discussed here.

For the most part, the debate I am focused on has looked at Merleau-Ponty’s conception of perceptual normativity through a particular lens, or common assumption: that in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, perceptual norms are important to his solution to the problem of perceptual constancy.<sup>8</sup> The problem of perceptual constancy, as dealt with in the debate, is that we can perceive constant objects and properties of objects, despite the fact that they appear in qualitatively variable ways from different perspectives, and in different contexts. For instance, take the phenomenon wherein I perceive the colour of my car to be the same, constant colour blue both when it is seen in bright sunlight, and when it is seen in the shadowy garage. The physical characteristics of the sensory stimulus that meets my retina—the wavelength or intensity of light reflected from the

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<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty deals with perceptual constancy (a long-standing problem for philosophers of perception, dealt with at length by Husserl, for instance), directly in Chapter 3, “The Thing and the Natural World’ Chapter,” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (constancy of properties in Part A, and constancy of objects, or what he refers to as ‘the real thing’ in Part B) and writings in the immediate vicinity. For this reason, the debate has been centered on and these writings and mainly relied on certain passages within it for querying into Merleau-Ponty’s view on perceptual normativity.

surface of the car, for instance—varies between the two different contexts. Whereas I perceive the colour blue to be constantly the same from one context to the next. (If I didn't, and the colour of the car looked to be shifting, I would have a much harder time determining which car is mine, from context to context).

The debate I am focused on here follows from the seminal paper by Sean Kelly on a Merleau-Pontyan account of perceptual normativity, and what perceptual norms might be conceived or defined as, to those engaging a Merleau-Pontyan style of phenomenology and view of perception. I will start by laying out Kelly's positions (Section 1) since his construal of the problem informs the rest of the debate. I give an overview of two important challenges to Kelly's argument and conclusions pertaining to perceptual normativity, in Section 2.

### 1. Kelly's View

In "What We See (When We Do)?", Kelly attributes two phenomenological claims to Merleau-Ponty: that we experience perceptual phenomena as indeterminate, and that this indeterminacy plays a normative role in perception.<sup>9</sup> He uses these claims to understand the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. Kelly approaches the phenomenon of perceptual constancy not as something to explain from the objective point of view.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Kelly's

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<sup>9</sup> Sean Kelly, "What Do We See (When We Do)?" *Philosophical Topics* vol. 27, no. 2 (1999): 107-128.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly explains how empiricist accounts explain the phenomena of perceptual constancy, basically, by denying that it is a wholly *perceptual* one: they would say that what we see, being limited to the data that reaches our sense organs, is variable through varying contexts, while what we might *experience* as constant is supplied non-perceptually. On one such account that Kelly attributes to Hering, the constant colour we claim our wall *to be* would refer to is what Hering calls a "memory colour", which is a memory-like preservation of the experience of seeing the colour we have seen in normal perceptual circumstances of looking at the wall, which would be defined by the context in which we most often see the wall. (Kelly, "What do we see?", 113.) On another account that Kelly attributes to Russell, the constant colour we claim our wall *is*, is not necessarily seen but supplied by a belief about the colour we would see *if* we adopted a detached perspective of "a normal spectator from an ordinary point of view under usual conditions of light". (Quoted in *ibid.*) But we would have to say that both of these explanations of colour constancy deny the fact that included in the content of what we see is the *contribution* of the lighting context to the qualitative appearance of the green that we do see as constant. (*Ibid.*, 115.)

approach is phenomenological, and aims at accurately specifying the phenomenon of perceptual constancy as directly experienced from the point of view of the subject.

The first phenomenological claim is that the content of perceptual experience is *indeterminate*. By perceptual content, Kelly means the phenomena we have perceptual experience of (or, which we bodily intend as perceptual subjects). Kelly is taking up the question *what do we see?*, interpreted in what he calls the intentional or phenomenological sense.<sup>11</sup> The second phenomenological claim, which Kelly only briefly touches on in “What do we see?” but defends in the paper “Seeing Things,” is that this indeterminate content plays a *normative* role in perception.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 109. Here the goal is to specify, or accurately describe, one’s perceptual experience in a way that other potential ways of interpreting the question do not. For this reason, Kelly is not asking the epistemological question of ‘what do we see?’ that would ask, ‘what we are justified in believing we see given potential skeptical worries?’ (107). He makes the explicit assumption that we do, at times, succeed in seeing things, setting aside skeptical worries simply because these would not be of help in the task of specifying the experience that, undoubtedly, we *do* see ordinary things around us (108). Also, Kelly is not getting into the metaphysical question of what we see, answered along the lines of what the proper objects of perception are, whether we see them directly or indirectly, what it means to be an object out there in the world, and so on (108). On strict phenomenological grounds (that is, on grounds of descriptive accuracy, 110), he assumes the metaphysical position that he says is natural for the (Merleau-Pontyan or Heideggerian) phenomenologist, which is that of the direct or naïve realist who would “believe both that we have a direct, unmediated relation to the objects of perception and that the proper objects of perception are just the familiar objects of the world” (109-110). I take this conception of perception—as Kelly calls, it an “anti-Cartesian belief that our primary relation to the ordinary world is direct and unmediated” rather than say, mediated by a representation—to be an accurate and commonly agreed-upon reading of Merleau-Ponty’s own view (110). He indicates this, for instance, by saying such things as “I aim at and perceive a world... [The] world is what we perceive” (quoted at 110). These epistemological and metaphysical assumptions are acknowledgedly undefended by Kelly, and the truth or falsity of these positions do not matter, he says, for the phenomenological task.

<sup>12</sup> The reference is Sean D. Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 74-110.

These two points, about indeterminacy and normativity, parallel Kelly’s way of presenting his two phenomenological facts in engagement with the two psychological theories of perception in “What Do We See?”. But I am presenting these phenomenological findings, based on the two papers, slightly differently than he did, in order to set up this debate and to clarify what are important ideas of Merleau-Ponty.

### Indeterminacy

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that perceptual content is indeterminate, for instance, at the beginning of *Phenomenology of Perception* where he attacks what he takes to be the two broadly-construed categories of classical theories of perception: empiricism and intellectualism. Both are based on what he calls ‘objective thinking,’ that is characterized by an unquestioned belief in the objective world. Both endorse the view that the basic unit of sensation, or content of ‘what we see,’ is an isolated unit or datum of (objectively) determinate quality. Objective thinking views sensation as being defined by determinate, measurable qualities of that objective world, and perception as a further stage of processing of these sensible units allowing us to see multi-sensory things.<sup>13</sup> Once we give up a tendency to assume an objective world, then one thing we can recognize from our direct perceptual experience of the world is that any such determinate quality we see is in fact (and necessarily) surrounded by “an indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other,” which Merleau-Ponty says is a “positive phenomenon” (that is, it is meaningful with respect to the subject’s life project, and is not just a lack of sense).<sup>14</sup> The ‘determinate quality’ of the classical theories of perception is not basic to perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty says, but a “recently introduced object of scientific consciousness” which, if read onto the phenomenal world unduly, will render our attempts at phenomenological account of perception incomprehensible.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Recalling the Introduction, on the empiricist view, these are independent and externally-related building blocks of perceivable things, and perception involves a passive recording of sensible units channeled through one of the five senses in a causal interaction with the world, and then an ‘observation’ about which sensory units frequently accompany one another. The intellectualist view will take the same units of sensation, and then conceive of perception as a judgement that actively interprets the stimuli: that is, perception is a mental act by the subject, confined to consciousness. (This brief sketch of empiricist and intellectualist views of sensation and perception is presented in David R. Cerbone, “Perception,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2014), 122-129.)

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 6-7. I will be referring to this translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In an effort to conceptualize the characteristics of perception that such objective thinking misses, Merleau-Ponty takes the important result from Gestalt psychology that the most basic perceptual given is the meaningful whole of “a figure against a background,” and that this structure is necessary and “the very definition of phenomenon” without which perception would be impossible.<sup>16</sup> As Kelly points out, Merleau-Ponty thinks of this positive, indeterminate phenomenon that we see “canonically” as the presence of the background upon which the figure that we see appears.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I will at times choose to use the term ‘horizon’ to refer to what Kelly terms the ‘background.’<sup>18</sup> The horizon is another notion that Merleau-Ponty adopted from the Gestalt psychologist view of perception. It refers to what we experience as the indeterminately or tacitly given sense that is contributed to the sense of the focal part of our experience, by the other parts related to it in the phenomenal field. The perceptual structure is integrated as a meaningful whole, just as the Gestalt psychologists found in the visual paradigmatic case of the figure-ground perception.<sup>19</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, any object of perception is perceived not in isolation but in a field, inseparably from a horizon of meaning. I always perceive things of the world in an object-horizon structure, which is said by Merleau-Ponty to be *what a perspective is*.<sup>20</sup> The object-horizon structure is (paradoxically) the means by

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly “Seeing Things”, 82.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly uses this terminology of the object-horizon and figure-ground structure interchangeably at times, but remains with the terms of figure-ground structure to discuss perceptual normativity. I think it is more conceptually precise, rather, to refer to the object-horizon structure, the perspective, as the basic structure of embodied perception of the world for Merleau-Ponty. Thus, I will sometimes use this terminology when presenting Kelly’s view, especially with regard to the phenomenon of object constancy.

<sup>19</sup> Donald A. Landes, *The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 95.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70. Merleau-Ponty also thinks of temporal experience as having a horizontal structure by which the present meaningfully retains a sense of the past and protends a sense of the future. (Landes, *The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary*, 95.)

which objects conceal themselves (limit our view of them to a perspective), and unveil themselves (being the structure of our relation to the object).<sup>21</sup>

In “Seeing Things”, Kelly argues for an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in which the indeterminate phenomenon of horizon plays a normative role in perception.<sup>22</sup> To interpret how Merleau-Ponty would conceive of this, Kelly looks at problem of perceptual *constancy*. Kelly’s account of Merleau-Ponty’s view, here, is that we find that the content of perceptual experience to be indeterminate by first seeing that we cannot specify the experience of perceiving constant objects and properties without taking into account contextual features and making a crucial distinction between what we see something *to be* and the *way* we see it to be (or, the *way* it *looks*).

Attending to our ordinary perceptual experience, we do not just perceive things in the world as they *are*, in the sense of what *objects* are there or what *properties* these objects have. That is, we do not just perceive a world of determinate objects and properties before us. For instance (to use an adapted version of Kelly’s illustration), when I look at the familiar green-painted wall of my living room, I can see that it is green. Yet, I do not *only* see its green (as the object of perception, so to speak), or more generally, its colour, in any determinate sense.<sup>23</sup> I can also see *the way the object looks* in its context and surroundings. That is, the green’s *way of looking to me* will vary (qualitatively) depending on the contextual features of the situation of my looking at

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70. In the next chapter, I devote a section to examining the question of how embodied subjectivity entails the perspective, or object-horizon structuration to perception.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 79. Kelly contrasts this to what he takes to be the position of Husserl, which is that while it is a fact that we perceive objects to transcend the perspective and determinate sense-data we have of them (e.g. we perceive them to be a three-dimensional object with ‘hidden sides’ and ‘hidden properties’ to those sides), these indeterminate features are entirely absent from perceptual experience. For Husserl, says Kelly, the indeterminate features are indeterminate in the sense of not-yet-determined to the senses; we do not see them but rather form a belief or hypothesis that *if* we move in a certain way, *then* we can determine the hidden feature in question. (Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 80-1).

<sup>23</sup> This example is given at Kelly, “What do we see?”, 114-5.

the wall.<sup>24</sup> The wall's green certainly *looks qualitatively differently* to me depending on the level of the lighting (it might look shady, more shady, or brightly-lit), and may even vary depending on other contextual features such as shadows cast on the wall, my distance to the wall, nearby colours that the green contrasts with in my view of it (a blue curtain next to the wall, say), and so on. This variation is contextual and not a variation of the green itself, which in ordinary experience we see as constantly green. For instance, if the wall was actually painted with dark-green paint in some area, I would be able to see that the wall, in that area, appears *to be* dark-green at this time, and is no longer actually the same green. The green of the wall seems *to us a certain way* that is context-dependent (it appears as green-with-shadows in the evening, green-brightly-lit in the morning, say), and yet, still we can see determinately what the wall's colour *is*, really, through a range of contexts.<sup>25</sup> Put differently: in the constancy phenomenon, we do not experience the green of the wall to be changing, even while the *way it looks* may qualitatively change in an extent of ways (and, to be clear, these are Kelly's terms for a distinction made previously by Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and so on, in a variety of different terms).<sup>26</sup>

This distinction in the example I have been discussing of colour constancy through variation in lighting, of what the property in question looks *to be* and the *way* it looks or appears, can be made in general pertaining to other cases of perceptual constancy. For example, I can distinguish the *way* the shape of a penny looks like an ellipse, from my perception of the penny's shape *to be*

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<sup>24</sup> Again, on strict metaphysical grounds of descriptive accuracy, we are not (and do not have to be) concerned with the metaphysical issue that arises here of what these 'ways' are. Likewise, 'qualitative' is used in a metaphysically neutral way, for now. Sean Kelly, in an unpublished "Preface to 'Seeing Things,'" Draft for NYU Seminar in Philosophy of Mind March 11, 2004, 4 n. 5 admits of this, and refers us to Sydney Shoemaker, "On the Way Things Appear," in *Perceptual Experience*, ed. John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 461-480 for an example of how to take up such surrounding issues.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly, "What do we see?", 109.

<sup>26</sup> This is a limited phenomenon, however: if the lighting were changed to become red-toned, say, we might actually not be able to experience the wall as being constantly green, anymore. The constancy phenomenon breaks down.

constantly circular, as the angle at which I view it varies: this pertains to the experience of shape constancy. I can distinguish the *way* a person's height looks when they are 100m from me, from the height I see the person *to be*, a constant, as they approach and eventually stand right before me (that is, as the distance varies): this pertains to the experience of size constancy. This kind of distinction, and that what we see includes something other than just a determinately constant colour, shape, or size, is Kelly's first important observation about the experience of perceptual constancy in "What Do We See?". He claims that Merleau-Ponty observes this distinction as well.<sup>27</sup>

### Normativity and Property Constancy

The next claim of Kelly's that I would like to focus on is that there is a dimension of perceptual *normativity* to our perceptual experience when we see constant objects and properties. That is, the contextual features or what I have previously called the 'background' features, on which the *way an object or property looks* depend, play a normative role in experience, referring the perceiver to a better view of the object or property. *What* we see as constant in perception are not so much 'constant' objects and properties that have determinate measures. What is constant or 'the same' through varying contexts in these cases, on Kelly's account, is the perceptual norm, which will be *indeterminately* present throughout the various perceptual contexts. On Kelly's account, the norm is defined in reference to the *optimal context* that provides the *most revealing view* of the objects or their properties. And it is the background of the figure-background structure of perception to which we attribute the normative role that allows us to *best see* the property or object, as it *is*.

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<sup>27</sup> Kelly, "What do we see?", 114. I am presenting this distinction somewhat preliminarily here, though it is worth mentioning that a debated question is whether we can be said to *see* both of these, the constant property or object *as it is*, as well as the *way it looks*, at the same time and from the same perceptual attitude.

To present this reading of Merleau-Ponty's conception of perceptual normativity, through which we best see the fact that perceptual content must be indeterminate, I will return to my illustration of colour constancy. Suppose that we are looking at a uniformly-coloured, green wall, and that there is an uneven pattern of lighting on it, due to shadows being cast or multiple light sources shining, say.<sup>28</sup> We can imagine being able to see that the green of the wall is the same, even though it looks differently in different areas, dependent on the lighting in that area (whether it is shadowed or well-illuminated). Kelly's idea, which he attributes to Merleau-Ponty, is that the lighting plays an indeterminate and normative role: that is, the lighting presents itself "not as a determinate quantity but rather in terms of how well it enables me to see the thing I'm looking at".<sup>29</sup> This is because, Kelly says, if you were asked to look at the wall and determine its colour, your eyes would automatically (in a direct, bodily-intentional way, which keeping in mind may not be 'conscious' in any explicit sense) be inclined to move around on the surface until finding a favourable part of the wall where the colour that the wall *is*, its green, shows *best*.<sup>30</sup> There would be a sense that *here*, at one area of the wall, I'm not seeing the colour optimally because it is too shadowy, whereas *there*, the lighting is just right for seeing the green—at both these points, I am seeing in reference to the best view, the norm.<sup>31</sup> There are different degrees, we could say, of quality of view of the same green, which are internal to lived perception of the green wall and which do not require further reflective comparison or measurement. These are positively contributed to experience, in the way I've described this example, mainly by the

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<sup>28</sup> Here I am adapting the example Kelly uses of the table in uneven lighting. (Kelly, "Seeing Things," 84-5).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 11.

lighting. The subject experiences the lighting as leading them to automatically seek the best view, and this is not because of any beliefs the subject holds.<sup>32</sup>

Merleau-Ponty highlights this normative role that the lighting context plays in perceptual experience by speaking of the lighting as *leading* or *directing* (depending on the translation) the subject's gaze, inclining her bodily movement to see the colour in the optimal context. The lighting context can do this only as a background feature of perception that is indeterminate, unlike the more constant property, the green, that we are trying to see better. Merleau-Ponty says, "Lighting and reflection only play their role if they fade into the background as discreet intermediaries, and if they *direct* our gaze instead of arresting it."<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the place on the wall which shows the colour best would not depend just exclusively on the lighting, but on a host of other contextual features that appear in the background, as I perceive the constant property. Together, these contextual features can be encapsulated as features of our bodily *situation*: "lighting and the constancy of the illuminated thing, which is its correlate, depend directly on our bodily situation."<sup>34</sup> For instance, our own

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<sup>32</sup> The reader may have further questions about the structure of this (embodied) normative dimension of perceptual experience and how it differs from the structure of experience of belief, which is an interesting topic for contemporary phenomenology more broadly. Kelly is making a claim that there is a kind of motor-intentional (as Merleau-Ponty would call it) perceptual content in which we are immediately compelled (or, *motivated*) to act in response to what are the environment's *solicitations* and afforded possibilities. This intentional content is incompatible with the nature of having a belief about this content, such that we cannot interpret it as a belief (c.f. Sean D. Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus, "Heterophenomenology: Heavy-handed Sleight-of-hand," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 1-2 (2007): 45-55). Kelly and other commentators I will deal with adopt the way of thinking about the content of this kind of motor-intentional experience (say, content <x>) in which we are immediately drawn to act in a certain way while being unable to represent this in terms of an "I think <x>" as an *affordance* (a term coined from the psychologist J.J. Gibson; see Kelly and Dreyfus, "Heterophenomenology," 51-52). What distinguishes affordances from beliefs is that "affordances draw activity out of us only in those circumstances in which we are not paying attention to the activity they solicit" (ibid., 54). Cf., also, Susanna Siegal, "Affordances and the Content of Perception" in *Does Perception Have Content?*, ed. Berit Brogaard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 51-75. At 51-52 Siegel says Merleau-Ponty and Kelly have this view of affordances not being representational. This is what Merleau-Ponty means at *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139, where he states that "consciousness is originarily not an 'I think that,' but rather an 'I can'."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

bodily comportment and other features of the environment would be importantly inseparable from the normativity effect: if there is a table between me and the wall, I am limited in how I can move to best look; I might be led to lean my body over it to see better. If my body is short as opposed to tall, I might have to look differently at the surface of the wall to get the best view. Even the colour of the wall itself that we are looking at must be recognized as contributing to the way we move to best see it, as Kelly points out: dark colours can be seen best in brighter light, and brighter colours can be seen best on patches that are more dimly light.<sup>35</sup>

My distance to the object as I look at it, another feature of the bodily situation, is inseparable from the other contextual features playing this normative role. Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of the normativity of distance in the following passage, emphasizing that there *is* a norm, and that it is an “optimal” bodily situation that allows for a “maximum of visibility”:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen—an orientation through which it presents more of itself—beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point, which is obtained by an equilibrium between the interior and exterior horizons.<sup>36</sup>

There is a sense in which it is not clear *what* or *who* plays the role of leading my gaze, whether it is me the subject or the lighting: Merleau-Ponty says, “The lighting directs my gaze and leads me to see the object, so in one sense it [the lighting] *knows* and *sees* the object.”<sup>37</sup>

Merleau-Ponty will return to emphasize this sense of the anonymity of the phenomenon whose role is this direct bodily inclination or tendency towards an optimum, in a later writing: “finally

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<sup>35</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 84.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 315-6. Kelly uses a different translation and quotes this passage slightly different.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

one cannot say if it is the look or the things that command.”<sup>38</sup> Body-subject is extended between self and other in the world of perception in which it is meaningfully integrated.<sup>39</sup>

To take into account this positive effect of the horizontal features of the situation, it is impossible to conceive of the horizon as being perceived by subject as a determinate entity (comprised of the sense-data as the objective thinking about perception might assume). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the viewing distance, or any other contextual feature playing a normative role such as lighting, is not experienced as a determinate quantity that would increase or decrease in a measureable sense. Rather, the norm is a lived sense in the phenomenal field, which the subject is bodily related to from the inside (that is, from the subject’s point of view).

Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of normativity as that of “a tension which oscillates around a norm,” which Kelly seems to understand as emphasizing the indeterminacy of the sensed norm.<sup>40</sup> Body, we know from experience, does not experience inner tensions in a determinate sense. To better see what Merleau-Ponty is saying about normativity here, I think the following explanation is helpful for making sense of Kelly’s account of lived normativity. The subject senses the norm as an indeterminate *something*, and by means of this sense, they are able to move to better see the property. What, we could ask, is the norm’s means of doing this? The

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133. This is quoted on Kelly, “Seeing Things” 105-6 n. 15. He identifies this situated, direct bodily inclination to act with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of motor intentionality, which for Merleau-Ponty is the basic way of human being-in-the-world as directed towards possible (motor) acts and significations. Cf. Landes, *Dictionary*, 133. The terms ‘situated’ or ‘situation’, in the Merleau-Pontyian context, refer to the condition of embodied subject as existing embedded in phenomenal field as part. As a part of the world, the subject has a relatedness to other meaningful parts in the field: this condition of set relations is its situation. The situation places the subject in certain relations of (phenomenal) proximity or distance to possible meanings in the field, which is why we experience only certain possible meaningful involvements as being ‘in reach’, in the phenomenal sense. Paradoxically, being situated is a means of involvement with the world, as much as it is a limitation on possibilities.

<sup>39</sup> Put differently: the subject has an original experience of anonymity, or of being meaningfully bound to the sense of the world that is extension of its life project, prior to the possibility of experiencing the world as made of parts, and themselves as a self distinct from the other meanings that surround them.

<sup>40</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 316.

norm's means of moving the body such a way, I think, is the internal relation which the subject has to the sense of the property itself, in virtue of having the subject's point of view on the sense (which is to say, that the sense of the property in question is meaningful relative to the subject's life project). This internal relation, then, can be thought of as an embodied tension that pulls the subject in the 'norm direction,' that is, toward the context that provides the 'most revealing' or 'optimal' view of the sense of the property. The subject's movement from worse to better view is only meaningful relative to this optimal context allowing the best view (what Kelly is identifying with the norm itself), while on the other hand, the optimal context allowing for the best view is meaningful *as optimal* (the normative sense) relative to the movement from what are experienced as worse to better views. (It is a lived norm, in this way—the optimal context needs to be experienced as optimal or else defining it as optimal makes no sense.) This sounds circular, and likely is. The *means* of getting to the best viewing context and the best viewing context itself are meaningfully intertwined (just as the best viewing context and the best view of the property are), since from the subject's point of view, movements themselves are meaningful in relation to the task at hand (which would be to see the sense of the property in question).

Thus, the experience of normativity is depicted by Merleau-Ponty as a "tension which oscillates around a norm," I think, because normativity is the experience of a solicitation in the direction of an indeterminate sense, for the sake of revealing that sense. Just as we commonly think of a tension as directed toward its end by means of its end; normativity is the meaning of the experience of being directed toward the context that offers the optimal view, and this direction is by means of the norm. Body-subject can live such an original normative experience only because body-subject has an inside connection (i.e., a lived relation) to the sense of the property in question. Body viewed from the objective point of view cannot be understood to

move in such a normative way, its being separated in objective space from other objects with no “internal means” of direct connection to things.

According to Kelly’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, in the experience of perceptual constancy of properties, the norm can be thought of as referring to the “optimal viewing context” of the property in question, since it is to the optimal viewing context that our bodily point of view is ‘drawn toward’, or in other words directed towards, by the tension-like and indeterminate sense of the norm. This does not mean, however, that we experience the best view of the colour only when our objective body is place in an objectively determinately best context. The optimal context is not a spatiotemporal location in objective space that is defined by a measureable relation to some determinate feature of the object. (If it were, one would be hard-pressed to explain the normative ‘tension’ in objective terms, since it is a subjective tension to do with meaning in relation to the subject’s life projects). The optimal context that is the norm is not independent of the subject; it is something subjective and defined based on an internal relation that is maintained as the subject’s body moves to the better view (and we must avoid the tendency to view this movement strictly from an objective point of view, as a movement of an object through objective space). In this way that is *normative* from the inside point of view, throughout the motion of the body from worse, to better, to optimal view, the subject can constantly view the colour green that is revealed.

This phenomenological claim of the normativity of perception of constant colour in the unevenly-lit wall example can be made analogously to other cases of perceptual constancy of properties. For an example of size constancy as based on a perceptual norm, suppose, for instance, that I have the chance to walk toward my favourite basketball player to get a better sense of how tall he really is. (Note that I would only do so as a subject to whom this is a

meaningful thing to do.) His height, of course, is perceived as being a constant size as I walk towards him, even if it is appearing in different *ways* as the objective distance between us decreases and the angle of his body's extension projected onto my retina increases. The improving perception of this person's real height is guided in part by my sensitivity to whether I am "too close" or "too far", relative to a norm which is defined in part by the optimal distance apart we should aim to stand at, in order for me to get the best sense of his particular height. (This will not be a determinate or measured sense; I will not be using any objective standards of measure, like a height in inches and feet, in this evaluation).

In terms of the figure-ground basic structure of this perception, Kelly would attribute to Merleau-Ponty the view that it is the 'background' features of this perception (or in other words, contextual features like the distance between us, my own height, the player's immediate surroundings, and so on) *qua* background, together and inseparably, that play a normative role throughout my walking towards the basketball player. My own upcoming interpretation of Merleau-Ponty does not support this particular claim necessarily, and it is admittedly unclear to me how Kelly identifies the norm with the optimal context allowing for the best view (which I take to be a phenomenological claim about normativity made from the subject's point of view, and valid), but then also makes the structural claim that the background itself plays a normative role.

### **Object Constancy and the "View from Everywhere"**

In the subsequent part of "Seeing Things," Kelly extends this his account to deal with how Merleau-Ponty conceives the relation between normativity and perception of constancy of objects (as opposed to properties). The phenomenon (or, problem) of object constancy is that we are able to see the same, one object, despite a flux of perspectives and contexts in which we see

it. This is understood by Merleau-Ponty to be a perceptual experience. I perceive my book to be a constant object when it moves around my apartment and travels around the city with me: its defining properties (the green of the cover, the texture of the pages, the size and dimensions, the weight) are experienced as constantly belonging to the same thing, and I do not experience the book as a different copy, despite the variations in situations we go through. Kelly argues for a reading of Merleau-Ponty on which what we experience as constant, in the phenomenon of object constancy, is the presence to perception of a perceptual norm. The constancy of the object is perceived indeterminately, felt as a tension with respect to this norm, on Kelly's account (and this is just what was claimed in the comparable case of property constancy).<sup>41</sup>

In the case of object constancy, however, Kelly's conception of the perceptual norm is differently conceived, in some important ways, from the norm in the case of constant properties. Kelly argues that in the case of object constancy, Merleau-Ponty's writings suggest (though do not explicitly state) that we should understand the norm as a virtual "view from everywhere all at once,"<sup>42</sup> which is constantly present to our perception in what may seem like a strange sense: that what we constantly see is our object being seen from everywhere. This being-seen-from-everywhere of the object is possible by the object-horizon structure of perspective. We see an object, again, not in isolation, but necessarily with a horizon of tacit meaning (the sides of it that I see faced away or hidden from my view, for instance).

We can think of the constant object that we focus on, Kelly says, as being a focal point of a system of objects that stand, on the horizon, in phenomenal spatial relations to the object in our

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<sup>41</sup> Again, like with perceptual constancy of properties, the phenomenon of constancy of objects is limited, and can break down in some contexts and variations on the object. For example, it is possible that due to a misadventure my book changes appearance so drastically that it no longer appears to be the same constant object.

<sup>42</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things," 92.

focus.<sup>43</sup> Looking at the constant object as being surrounded by other things, what necessarily gets included in this view of the object are virtual viewpoints we could *potentially* inhabit, in these other things. We see the constant object *figuring in our perception as being surrounded by a milieu of other objects*. Kelly takes from this that we see such a view, the view from everywhere all at once, *being had*, since these potential viewpoints to which hidden sides of the focal object are in view are perceptually present to us in this indeterminate way. Kelly defends this reading of Merleau-Ponty relying much on a particular passage of *Phenomenology of Perception* which I will quote in full and henceforth refer to as the ‘seeing things’ passage. It is an important passage for the entire debate.

To see is to enter into a universe of beings that *show themselves*, and they could not show themselves if they could not also be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words, to see an object is to come to inhabit it and to thereby grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn towards this object. And yet, to the extent that I also see those things, they remain places open to my gaze and, being virtually situated in them, I already perceive the central object of my present vision from different angles. Each object, then, is a mirror to all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can “see.” The back of my lamp is merely the face that it “shows” to the fireplace. Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. Each act of seeing that I perform is instantly reiterated among all the objects of the world that are grasped as coexistent because each object just is all that the others “see” of it. Thus, our formula above must be modified: the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house seen from everywhere. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden.<sup>44</sup>

Kelly insists that we cannot, however, read Merleau-Ponty to mean that we could inhabit all the viewpoints that we see simultaneously, since we are embodied and situated perceivers with necessarily limited perspectives. We are, ourselves, one such entity in the surroundings of the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70–71, quoted with a slightly different translation in “Seeing Things,” 76, 91.

constant object, and we only *actually* inhabit our own embodied situation (by the sense of the word inhabit and situation). Therefore, Kelly says, *I* can never actually take up the “view from everywhere” on the object.<sup>45</sup> On this reading, the “view from everywhere” Merleau-Ponty refers to merely “represents the context that would give us a ‘maximum grip’ on the object” if we could have it, the one that “we experience our current context to deviate from.”<sup>46</sup>

What, then, does it mean to say that the norm is the “view from everywhere”? It means that the norm, the necessarily indeterminate sense of the object being seen from all inhabitable sides by other objects it is surrounded by, serves a function of leading us (in a direct, bodily manner) from worse views to better views of the object as it is.

Kelly fills in this account by noting that not all inhabitable views on the focal object are equivalent: some are better or more preferable than others, particularly the ones that reveal more of the object’s revealing features.<sup>47</sup> One can make sense of this idea by reflecting on a few examples where we automatically are led to a preferred view on a thing. A coffee mug, for instance (to use Kelly’s example) is experienced to be better viewed as a coffee mug when we see the handle in profile rather than when the handle is hidden in the backside.<sup>48</sup> A framed painting is an object that we sense as more revealing of its being a framed painting, when looked at from the front as opposed to from the side, top, or back—being confronted with these worse views would lead us to turn to the better view. Empirical studies have shown that when people are presented with objects they have never seen before, and asked to explore them, they spend more time on certain preferred sides from which to view it from (corresponding to a front, back,

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<sup>45</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 91.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 92-3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

and left and right profiles), and much less time on views at intermediate angles to these.<sup>49</sup> Kelly's claim is that "better points of view immediately solicit me to take them up while worse points of view are immediately avoided."<sup>50</sup> That this perceptual normativity is possible, on the account we are giving, is only since these features are perceived 'hidden' in the background and indeterminately, in the ordinary variety of experience to which the phenomena of object constancy belongs.

The following is further textual support (coming just paragraphs before the 'seeing things' passage) that Kelly uses for his claim that it is the objects on the horizon of my perspective, experienced indeterminately as potential situations from which I could take a better or worse view on the focal object from, that together play a normative role in perception of the constant object:

[Background] objects recede into the periphery and become dormant, while, however, not ceasing to be there. Now with them I at my disposal their horizons, in which there is implied, as a marginal view, the object on which my eyes at present fall. The horizon, then, is what guarantees the object throughout the exploration"<sup>51</sup>

Like the case of the norm perceptible in the phenomenon of property constancy, the "view from everywhere," as Kelly takes it, is constantly experienced as I move to better or worse views on the object. The "view from everywhere" referred to in the 'seeing things' passage, Kelly argues, should be identified with the horizon that "guarantees the object throughout the exploration." Thusly, Kelly takes the perceptual norm to be a Merleau-Pontyan solution to the problem of perceptual constancy of objects.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 108 n. 30.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>51</sup> This is from a different translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* (translated by Colin Smith), quoted at Kelly, "Seeing Things," 93-94.

In the last quotation, Merleau-Ponty seems to be coming very close to saying this—he states the horizon’s role in guaranteeing the constancy of the object through variation in perspective. However, as Kelly points out, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly state that the horizon *is* the norm from which we experience a tension or deviation from, in every perspective on the object.<sup>52</sup> In fact there is no explicit mention of the horizon or background playing a normative role in the case of object constancy, anywhere in Merleau-Ponty’s writings. Referring to his claim that the norm is the horizon (the “view from everywhere”) guaranteeing the constancy of the object, Kelly admits that, “Everything he says leads him to this view. Yet, amazingly, I can find no place here he states it explicitly.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, on Kelly’s reading, Merleau-Ponty not only fails to make explicit the conclusion he was supporting, but “gets his own view wrong” (or in other words contradicts Kelly’s interpretation directly) elsewhere. In other writings, Merleau-Ponty seems to define the “real thing” as a kind of infinite sum of perspectival views rather than a norm, which Kelly worries verges on the kind of phenomenologically disastrous territory that Merleau-Ponty accuses Husserl of on this question.<sup>54</sup> This lack of textual evidence for Kelly’s claim that Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the problem of object constancy is the norm (and the fact that it admittedly conflicts with what Merleau-Ponty seems to be reporting of his view of the real thing) is one major weak point in Kelly’s argument. Kelly’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty on perceptual normativity will face criticism along this and some other lines, which I will now examine.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> On page *ibid.*, 94, Kelly points out the disadvantage of a Husserlian view in which the real thing is a “nexus of appearances”, a system of infinitely many possible perspectival views, most of which are *not* perceptually present, but referred to in their absence, in any given view. This would entail a negation of the phenomenological claim, “I see a whole 3D object.”

## 2. Lajoie and Matherne in Response to Kelly's View

In this section I will lay out the development of a debate that has emerged in response to Kelly's seminal paper, "Seeing Things." I will be focusing on the two main voices: those of Corinne Lajoie and Samantha Matherne.<sup>55</sup> My aim in this section is twofold: to present what I think are their helpful objections to the view I have just put forth as being Kelly's reading of Merleau-Ponty on perceptual normativity, and to present their proposed alternative ways of taking up the question of what a perceptual norm is, based on Merleau-Ponty's thought.

### **Lajoie on the Roles of Interest and Temporality**

Lajoie is in agreement with Kelly on the fact that for Merleau-Ponty, embodied perception is situated and hence offers a necessarily limited perspective on the world. She further agrees with Kelly's general point that for Merleau-Ponty, perceptual content includes a normative dimension, by which we are implicitly aware of *how well* our current perspective reveals the object of our perception, and how we could move to see the object better.<sup>56</sup> Kelly's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's contribution to the question of perceptual norms as a solution to the problem of perceptual constancy of objects—that the perceptual norm in this case *is* the virtually possible 'view from everywhere' that the embodied subject can never actually take up—is rejected both by Lajoie and Matherne for a reasons interpretive and conceptual.<sup>57</sup>

Both Lajoie and Matherne disagree with Kelly's interpretation based on issues they find with his use of the extended 'seeing things' passage, which I quoted in the last section. Recall that in

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<sup>55</sup> The two references are Corinne Lajoie, "A Merleau-Pontian Account of Embodied Perceptual Norms," *Ithaque* 22 (2018):1-19; and Samantha Matherne, "Merleau-Ponty on Style as the Key to Perceptual Presence and Constancy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 4 (2017): 693-727.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> To be clear, I mean that they reject the interpretation. However, I do think these thinkers are also making the further point that we should reject the philosophical view itself. Lajoie refers to Kelly's account as "phenomenologically untenable," for instance, at "Embodied norms," 12.

this passage, Merleau-Ponty depicts a central object in a room (a lamp), that is surrounded by objects spatially related to it (on the horizon), which are experienced as soliciting the subject to inhabit different perspectives on the object (a “view from everywhere”). Recall that Kelly relied heavily on this passage to support his explanation of object constancy, and took from it his idea that the perceptual norm is defined by the optimal grip on the object, the “view from everywhere.”<sup>58</sup> Lajoie’s main criticism is that this notion of a norm “set by experientially inaccessible optimal viewpoints, which our current perception can asymptotically strive towards, without however reaching them” is thoroughly at odds with a Merleau-Pontyan understanding of perception as embodied and necessarily limited.<sup>59</sup> By having an explanation of object constancy that relies on positing a “hypothetical resolution of an all-encompassing and omniscient view,” Lajoie says, Kelly is promoting the view that the embodied and perspectival nature of perception is in itself “insufficient to generate perceptual norms and to account for our responsiveness to them.”<sup>60</sup> These virtual norms “lose their traction on lived experience” because they seem to imply a view of perception on which hypothesis or conceptual reconstruction is basically necessary for perception, in complete contrast to the Merleau-Pontyan sense that perception always already gives a view of the whole thing through a perspective and its horizational structure.<sup>61</sup>

For both Lajoie and Matherne alike, Kelly is led to this fundamentally untenable position due to the fact that there is a major exegetical problem with Kelly’s argument. The ‘seeing things’ passage, these commentators claim, does not in fact represent Merleau-Ponty’s own view, but is

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 9, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11, 12. This departure from Husserl, I think, can be pinned to the influence of the Gestaltists, who insisted on the unity of the figure-ground structure of perception, on Merleau-Ponty’s thinking about the object-horizon structure of perspective.

being presented as precisely the kind of view tending towards idealist thinking that Merleau-Ponty will ultimately refute.<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty is merely entertaining the idea of the “real thing” being “translucent... shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden”, and by the end of the section rejects the “view from everywhere” in the same way he rejects the “view from nowhere” (which he outlined just prior to this passage) as inconsistent with lived and embodied perception.<sup>63</sup> Merleau-Ponty cannot, Lajoie and Matherne say, be read seriously as putting forth a norm that is inaccessible to embodied experience. Kelly has therefore made the unfortunate mistake of relying heavily on a passage that reflects the objectivist stance of the object as posited in the absolute.<sup>64</sup> Merleau-Ponty equates this philosophical stance as “the death of consciousness” itself, since it misses the object at the heart of our every-day experience, and ignores the role of the body in perception.<sup>65</sup>

Lajoie further argues that Kelly misses the important contributions that practical interests and temporality make to embodied perceptual norms in general. Lajoie accuses Kelly of omitting the fact that norms emerge always in relation to a practical project or interest of the subject, and that they emerge temporally, claiming that this explains “serious difficulties his text amounts to” even beyond the exegetical mistake.<sup>66</sup> I will first take up her account of how interests are involved in perceptual norms.

For Merleau-Ponty perception of the phenomenon of constancy is dependent on the situation the embodied perceiver takes up. Lajoie claims that Merleau-Ponty thinks of the situatedness of the subject and a “spatiality of situation” as being “largely defined by the intentional projects

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<sup>62</sup> Lajoie, “Embodied norms,” 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 10. Quotations are from Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70-70.

<sup>64</sup> Lajoie, “Embodied norms,” 10.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 74.

<sup>66</sup> Lajoie, “Embodied norms,” 12.

towards which she gathers herself.”<sup>67</sup> That is, the perceiver’s interests define her situation as she comports herself towards an intended goal: the body, Merleau-Ponty says, is “polarized by its tasks, insofar as it exists toward them, insofar as it coils up upon itself in order to reach its goal.”<sup>68</sup> The dimension of practical life that we are referring to as interests of the subject, here, includes “practical interests, bodily imperatives, skills and habits, affective moorings, and the likes.”<sup>69</sup>

Lajoie defends her assertion that perceptual norms are defined relative to such practical interests in the following way. Merleau-Ponty often speaks of the optimal view of a thing in terms of an achievement of state of *equilibrium* in a perceptual dynamic—that is, a point at which a tension between perceptual needs (interests) and the environment’s affordances in relation to those needs, are resolved.<sup>70</sup> Consider what happens when our view of something is not in balance with our living, practical interest in the face of it:

A living body seen from too close, and lacking any background against which it would stand out, is no longer a living body, but rather a material mass as strange as the lunar landscape, as can be observed by looking at a segment of skin with a magnifying glass; and seen from too far away, the living body again lose its living value, and is no longer anything but a puppet or automaton.<sup>71</sup>

On Lajoie’s reading, this passage shows how our interest in the thing we are looking at, the body as a *living* body as opposed to as a “lunar landscape” or “puppet”, is what determines the value (or, quality) of a given view of a thing over another. There is a normativity implicit, here: we see not only the lunar landscape or the mid-range living body in isolation, but also that the lunar

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 108. Quoted in Lajoie, “Embodied norms,” 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Although Lajoie doesn’t point this out, this view of movement towards equilibrium she presents is comparable to Kelly’s notion of the norm being experienced as a tension which oscillates around a norm that we are guided to make null, by taking up the optimal view. Kelly refers to the norm as an equilibrium we move towards in Kelly and Dreyfus, “Heterophenomenology,” 53.

<sup>71</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 355-56. Quoted in Lajoie, “Embodied norms,” 11.

landscape's value is somehow lacking compared to the living value of the living body that fulfills our perceptual intent of looking at a living body *as living*.

This comparison of views—too close, too far, just right—reveals the way interests structure our situation and provide a normative dimension to experience: I experience the view as too close for my interest, too far for my interest, and then just right for my interest in seeing a living body. This structure, Lajoie is saying, is indispensable in accounting for the way we experience a norm as an equilibrium (or, put differently, a null tension) where perceptual needs of the subject are fulfilled by the environment in a corresponding way. By this example Lajoie illustrates how interests play a role in perceptual norms, which I agree is not stressed enough in Kelly's account.

The adjustment Kelly would need in his account of normativity in order to include the role of perceptual interests, I think, is this: that the norm can be defined relative to a perceptual interest *other than* that of “maximal visibility” of a property or object, wherein we best see the property or object revealed ‘as it is’, as in the experience of perceptual constancy that was his focus.

Take my example of seeing the colour of the wall by having the lighting and other contextual features work to lead our gaze to an optimal viewing patch (leaning over a table to see the best-lit patch from the right distance, say). The interest here, not stated explicitly as an interest by Kelly's account, is the interest in seeing the ‘real colour’ of the wall. That we do not necessarily or always have this same interest, when in the presence of the green of the wall, would be apparent from the fact that we do not always experience our gaze lead to look at the green of the wall where it is most visible—commonly the colour of the wall is not central to our interest, when we are in the living room or elsewhere. So perceptual norms in general, as lived norms that we experience as a reference to an optimal experience providing a sense of equilibrium where particular interest finds fulfillment, would be experienced *as norms* (i.e. as that indeterminate

component to perceptual content that guide us, in a direct, bodily way, to improve that experience) in relation to whatever is currently holding our interest: the TV set that we sit down in front of in a good context, the person we orient ourselves to best speak with, or the position we best situate ourselves in to read a book in a chair. Kelly's view, if we allow him that the 'interest' in his account is specified as that of seeing the real (constant) colour or object, can then just be taken as highlighting a particular kind of interest-based normativity experience. This is a way to defend Kelly from the main critique of his omission of the role of interest in perceptual norms. In my opinion, we should grant this kind of defence to Kelly since he comes close to saying that norms are dependent on interests, and that his discussion of normativity has considered the functioning of norms as limited to a particular kind of interest (although he uses the term 'purpose' instead of 'interest'): in a footnote, he clarifies that the "view from everywhere" is the norm specifically "for seeing something as a three-dimensional entity," whereas "there will be different norms for different purposes."<sup>72</sup>

Lajoie's account of the role of temporality in the emergence of norms, too, can be made to better cohere with Kelly's account if we keep in mind the fact that Kelly is looking at perceptual norms considering a particular kind of phenomena: that of perceptual constancy. Indeed, Kelly does not mention temporality explicitly, and emphasizes the *constancy* of presence of perceptual norms (again, Lajoie does not mention that this reflects his interest in the phenomenon of perceptual constancy). Lajoie argues that Kelly's positing of the virtual "view from everywhere" does not just omit but begs the question of how norms are established: she reads him as figuring norms as "posited explicitly as independent of our specific engagement of them" or even independently of our experience of them altogether.<sup>73</sup> But norms cannot be independent of our

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<sup>72</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things," 107, n. 24.

<sup>73</sup> Lajoie, "Embodied norms," 16.

experience or embodied engagement with them, she argues, since as just established, they are experienced relative to our practical interests.<sup>74</sup>

This argument, I think, unfairly exaggerates certain facets of Kelly's account. I suspect that this is related to Lajoie's unwillingness to accept the claim that in the context of Merleau-Ponty, a norm may be experienced virtually. But there are grounds, I think, to better explain how in Merleau-Ponty's thought, a norm *can* be experienced as virtual to an embodied perceiver, which is a question I will be able to come back to in Chapter 3. In the *Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty describes characteristic human behaviour as that in which embodied subject is oriented toward virtual sense. Here he means that the phenomenon is oriented towards as a possibility of sense among others in the field, as opposed to as a determinate "real thing" of the objective world. (There is a reversal of the usual relation between the terms 'real' and 'virtual' here, where the 'virtual' is being stressed as of a more original experience than the experience of the 'real'.) The fact that Kelly himself agrees that the virtual norm cannot be taken up by embodied subject, and that what the subject actually takes up is the "real thing," I think, is a problem with his account that reflects that he shares this misreading of the Merleau-Pontyan use of terminology.

On the grounds that she thinks Kelly has excluded the roles of temporality and interest in perceptual normativity, Lajoie finds Kelly's treatment of the norm as the "real property" or "real thing" to amount to an inaccurate positing of norms as atemporal, "pre-determined and fixed exogenous norms standing outside the course of experience."<sup>75</sup> Lajoie also says that her account of perceptual norms, i.e. that "our perceptions are context-sensitive and emerge in dynamic and labile environments in which our bodies attempt to find a proper equilibrium," is incompatible

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Lajoie, "Embodied norms," 12.

with Kelly's argument.<sup>76</sup> I have put forth that I disagree that the two accounts of Merleau-Ponty's conception of normativity are incompatible, since I think Kelly's account does not preclude his conceptions of norms being temporal and dependent on the subject's interest. This can be seen if we see that Kelly's claims about the normative structure of perception are specifically made in the context of the examining the phenomenon of constancy of property and object.

### **Matherne's Style-Based Account**

Samantha Matherne enters the debate in response to Kelly's "Seeing Things" to argue that Merleau-Ponty's conception of *style* is the key to understanding Merleau-Ponty's account of object constancy.<sup>77</sup> To orient to this concept of 'style' (of which there is no agreed-upon adequate definition in the literature), I can begin with what I take to be a few non-controversial indications of how it functions in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Style refers to what accounts for the unity of various parts and perspectival views that are possible on the same sense (or, the same perceptual object, if we are operating in terms of the object-horizon structure of perspective), as we directly experience such unity of sense in the phenomenal field. A sense we perceive persists continuously through various appearances we see of it, in virtue of its unique style. Given that Merleau-Ponty thinks the phenomenal field is more existentially fundamental than the objective world or than any transcendental field of idealism, he needs the concept of style to refer to the original existential unity found, from subject's point of view, in the phenomenal field of meaning. Such a unity is experienced prior to the experience of objective unity conceived by scientific consciousness. In an admittedly circular way, the style of a thing is what appears directly to subject who bodily-intends a part of the phenomenal field; it is also what that part of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>77</sup> Matherne, "Style as the key."

the phenomenal field has in virtue of which subject can intend it as a unity of parts (as opposed to as a fragmented sense whose parts are not meaningfully related).

When I appear in the world wearing my red scarf, for instance, it is the *style* of the red scarf that others immediately see (their recognition of the style is made inseparably from that of other intertwined styles, such as the style of my hair, shirt, or way of walking). Likewise, it is because my red scarf is a *style*, or in other words that the various components of its appearance such as redness, configuration on my body, appearance from different distances, and other horizontal meanings, are internally-related to form a unified sense, that I can project this unique sense as an appearance in the world.

Merleau-Ponty is notoriously difficult with terminology, and refers to this same notion accounting for the existential unity of sense in the phenomenal field as a thing's "manner of being", its "way of existing", its "essence", its "a priori", its "sense [sens]" as well as its "style."<sup>78</sup> I will devote a section of the next chapter to unpacking my interpretation of this concept as it fits with Merleau-Ponty's gestalt ontology (a conceptual tool of Merleau-Ponty's that helps us understand these unified wholes of sense as unfolding gestalt forms), and in that context will use the further alternative terms of 'look' and 'original unity of sense.' I think that Merleau-Ponty finds the word "style" useful for this philosophical notion since the commonly-used sense of the word "style" connotes the following, pertaining to the lived experience of these unities of perceptual sense: that the style is subjective (meaningful with regard to the subject's life project), that the style can continually evolve through time whilst remaining the same style (as one's hand-writing style does, for instance), that the style appears in the phenomenal world in relation to other styles (styles appear by 'blending' with others styles), that the style can be lived

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 710.

by biological organisms (who may live a unique life-style) or by non-living things and is inseparable from them<sup>79</sup>, and that the style can pertain to linguistic expressions (such as a style of speech or a style of phenomenology) as well as concrete things (such as a style of wood, or a style of car). We use the word style in relation to ways of moving, expressing, and carrying out activities, which are meaningful in the phenomenal field. In all of these senses, it is the style that allows the subject to grasp the meaning they see immediately, in a bodily (as opposed to conceptual) intentional way; the subject recognizes style (indeed, they must in order to be meaningfully involved with the sense) before being able to make explicit what the style is.<sup>80</sup> Merleau-Ponty would also say that the style *expresses* the sense, as principle of unity that allows for meaning to be conveyed coherently to the subject and among parts in the phenomenal field. Style is a term for what must play this sense-making role in the phenomenal field, since we experience such unities of sense prior to employing any other conceptual tools or categories to analyze the world before us.

There is ample textual evidence, argues Matherne, to show that Merleau-Ponty defends an account of perceptual constancy in which it is by recognizing a thing's distinct style as persisting through and unifying its varying appearances that we experience the constancy of the property or object in question.<sup>81</sup> On this account, Merleau-Ponty's notion of style is presented as dealing with the problem of perceptual constancy in such a way as to render the reading based on

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<sup>79</sup> That style is a principle of unity inseparable from the thing unified (unlike principles of unity of intellectualist theories) is a point made at by Matherne (ibid., 711).

<sup>80</sup> This point made about immediate recognition of style in a bodily, indeterminate sense is made by Matherne (ibid., 712-3), and based in the following text from *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The world has its unity without the mind having succeeded in linking its sides together and in integrating them in the conception of a geometrical plan. This unity is comparable to that of an individual whom I recognize in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character, because he conserves the same style in all that he says and in all of his behavior, even if he changes milieu or opinions. . . . I experience [*éprouve*] the unity of the world just as I recognize a style." (Quoted by Matherne at 712.)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 694-5.

normativity unnecessary. Matherne bases her critique of Kelly, then, primarily on the claim that Kelly overlooks a style-based account of object constancy that Merleau-Ponty explicitly defends.<sup>82</sup>

I will touch on a few points Matherne makes which indicate how style is a helpful concept for understanding the phenomenon of perceptual constancy, and how she takes this to challenge Kelly's normativity-based account. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, says Matherne, that the style of an object opens up a horizon of indeterminate sense of the (same) object: it "opens up a horizon in which the same object in virtue of its consistent style can be encountered from different perspectives."<sup>83</sup> Since we always perceive sense as a unity (or, as stylized), and the structure by which we orient towards that unity of sense is the object-horizon structure of perspective, we can understand how the concept of style would never refer to a unity of sense in isolation, or in abstraction from meaningful involvement with other senses. Rather, the stylization of sense occurs from a perspective, such that it contributes a unification of sense which is an opening up of a horizon of different possible ways in which the style can appear. The style, then, opens (makes possible) a general field of meaning on a sense, through the horizontal structure by which embodied perspective views it. The unity contributed to sense in virtue of style is not one that is based on a fixed determination or application of atemporal rules to experience. Rather, it is a power of holding together meanings which can then open a horizon of indeterminate sense, allowing the subject to (coherently) see a sense as a perspective among

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 711. For an example of textual support for Matherne's argument: "The perceived thing . . . is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question." (qtd. from Merleau-Ponty's "The Primacy of Perception" at *ibid.*, 711.)

others (as opposed to a meaningless fragment, which would not open a horizon of suggested meanings).

Matherne argues that this claim, that style opens up a horizon of indeterminate sense, is at odds with Kelly's proposal that the perceptual norm involved in perceptual constancy of objects is the "view from everywhere."<sup>84</sup> Her argument takes the following steps. She states that the horizon, which she sees as a "general way in which the object's style will show up...in the future, leaving the details [of this manifestation] indeterminate" might worry us because it resembles Kelly's 'view from everywhere.'<sup>85</sup> It would resemble the view from everywhere since (as I mentioned in the previous section) Kelly presents the view from everywhere in terms of a horizon of sense contributed to our perception of the object by the 'seeing things' surrounding the focal object, which we see as potential viewpoints we could inhabit. But Kelly's view from everywhere, she claims (and here is where I disagree with her), presents the horizon as *more determinate* than how Merleau-Ponty conceives the horizon. Here, she is referring to the Kelly's treatment of the horizon of the 'seeing things' passage: she presents Kelly's portrayal of the horizon as being determinate down to the very details of the object's hidden aspects that Kelly said were 'seen' by the surrounding objects.<sup>86</sup> The view being put forth by Matherne, she claims, is one that is more true to Merleau-Ponty's view that the horizon is importantly indeterminate than Kelly's is. And she wants to emphasize the indeterminacy of the horizon as what provides a sense of openness of the object which, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "[always sends] us beyond their determinate manifestations... [promising us always] 'something more to see.'"<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 711-2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 712.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., quoting from Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 348.

I believe that Matherne is inaccurately presenting Kelly's view, here. In fact, I think Matherne is making the same point that Kelly needed to make (and did make) about the importance of the horizontal structure being seen as indeterminate sense. A claim of Kelly's, as I described earlier, is that in the experience of constancy of objects, the horizon (which he refers to as the 'view from everywhere' and identifies with the norm) must necessarily be present to perception in an indeterminate way. If it did not, on Kelly's account there would be no normativity to be had based on the horizontal structure of perception that Merleau-Ponty describes in the 'seeing things' passage. In Kelly's account of the 'seeing things' passage, the subject is immediately and bodily directed to (indeterminate) possibilities of perceiving the focal object, in virtue of the horizontality of the structure. Thus, I think Matherne has no right to distinguish her view from what Kelly was putting forward on the point of indeterminacy.

Matherne's account of the phenomenon of perceptual constancy does not rely on a role played by perceptual norms at all.<sup>88</sup> Near the end of her paper, however, Matherne adds some initial suggestions about how her view relates to Kelly's and implies a normativity of perception. She is in agreement with Kelly that "our experience of perceptual presence and constancy involves normative awareness of what a better or worse look on an object is", and that there is textual support for this view belonging to Merleau-Ponty.<sup>89</sup>

Against what Lajoie would say, Matherne reads Kelly as having the view that the norm is determined relative to perceptual interest. On Matherne's reading of Kelly, the subject understands the constant object or property in virtue of motor-intentionality (that is, the orientation towards it as a thing to be explored by my body in virtue of my body's mobility in the world), and relative to a perceptual goal. Recall how for Kelly, the norm was defined in terms of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 722.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

the optimal context allowing for the object's most revealing features to be shown. The optimal context was most revealing relative to perceptual needs (or, interests). Matherne would add to this view by saying that normativity follows from motor-intentionality in that it is the intention that grounds the norm: "a better perception is one that at least partially fulfills these intentions, whereas a worse perception is one that does not."<sup>90</sup>

Where Matherne considers herself to differ significantly from Kelly is that she does not think the constant object we are led toward, in virtue of motor intentionality, should be seen as the norm, defined in reference to the optimal 'view from everywhere' on the object. Instead, we should see motor intentions being guided "by the constant object defined as an existential unity with its unique style."<sup>91</sup> Matherne claims that this is an advantage since the style-based account allows us to explain a normative *dimension* to perception, while avoiding committing to Merleau-Ponty there being a norm that cannot be realized or taken up by a subject: the 'view from everywhere.' The problem with the 'view from everywhere,' she says, is that being an ideal or virtual norm it is unrealizable and thus in conflict with Merleau-Ponty's emphasis of the "reality of the constant object" that the perceiver is in direct contact with.<sup>92</sup> I agree with Matherne (and Lajoie) that there is a genuine tension between the claim of Kelly's that a perceptual norm (the 'view from everywhere') can be experienced *virtually*, on the one hand, and the idea that Merleau-Ponty's sees perception as a lived and direct, embodied relationship to things, on the other hand, and that furthermore that the virtual norm cannot actually be taken up by the subject—this is a something I will come back to in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 724.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 723.

I am also in agreement with Matherne's general view that the notion of 'style' allows Merleau-Ponty to articulate how the phenomenon of perceptual constancy is resolved internally to perception, at the level of phenomenal meaning, from the intention structure of perception itself which perceives styles. My interpretation presented in the next chapter will be compatible with Matherne's view of the important role of style in relation to the phenomenon of perceptual constancy (although I will approach this differently and have very different argument, which will work by Merleau-Ponty's gestalt ontological conception of original sense).

However, I think that Matherne's under-emphasis of the importance of normativity in Merleau-Ponty's thinking, here, is a problem. To me, her explanation that intentions "found certain norms" does not help us understand the role of normativity itself, which Merleau-Ponty seems to emphasize at the passage of *Phenomenology of Perception* where he is dealing with the constancy phenomenon. In the end, the claim I want to better understand is that perception is normative, for Merleau-Ponty. Kelly's claim that what we indeterminately perceive as background features play a normative role in experience, I think, is a helpful hypothesis from which to work.

### 3. Conclusion

There are a few ways in which my approach to reading Merleau-Ponty on perceptual normativity, in the next chapter, will differ from that of the debate presented here. For one, I will interpret Merleau-Ponty as approaching the question of perceptual constancy in a specific way, and then show how his notion of normativity arises from this. In general, however, I will aim to present an account of perceptual normativity in the lived world of perception wherein we find directly related and communicating *phenomena*, as opposed to separate and constant objects perceived by subjects. The commentators in the debate just presented do not, I find, get clear

enough on the fact that we are reading Merleau-Ponty from the point of view of the existential phenomenologist who is looking for original experiences of constancy and normativity. On such an approach, we cannot take for granted the existence of an objective world of 'real' properties or objects. The phenomenon of perceptual constancy is a problem traditionally posed from the viewpoint of that objective world.

I think it is possible to elucidate the question of normativity, as well as perceptual constancy, by looking more holistically at Merleau-Ponty's writing up to *Phenomenology of Perception*. I do so, in the next chapter, to find support for my account of perceptual normativity in relation to his understanding of embodied subjectivity and the primacy of gestalt-structured perception. That central aim of Merleau-Ponty's in this work is to get us back to a way of thinking about perception as a meaningful and immediate mode of communication that is embodied and direct, but which also opens possibilities for perceiving definite objects upon which consciousness can reflect. Such perception is experientially prior to the certain kinds of scientific and objective thinking that have distorted our phenomenology of perception and which have put us out of touch with the perceptual phenomenon we experience every day, such as perceptual constancy (which has become a puzzle, apparently) and perceptual norms (which have gone unrecognized).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERCEPTUAL NORMATIVITY: DEFINITION OF ORIGINAL SENSE**

My overall aim in this chapter is to develop and defend an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perceptual normativity in a way that situates it in Merleau-Ponty's wider thought. In the last chapter, I presented a particular thread of debate among commentators on how Merleau-Ponty conceives perceptual normativity. I did this to provide a clear sense of the interpretive task at hand that I am concerned with, and to expose the core issues and areas of difficulty among commentators on this question. In this chapter, I put forward my own contribution to this debate. I use my interpretation to critically respond to the debate introduced last chapter, in the next chapter.

Here, I defend my position on the question of how Merleau-Ponty understands perceptual normativity by reading a particularly informative passage from the beginning of Chapter 3 of Part II ("The Thing and the Natural World") in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this passage, perceptual normativity is presented in a specific relation to the problem of perceptual constancy and how original perceptual sense is determined. I aim to tie this passage to Merleau-Ponty's broader thought about (1) embodied perception, and his gestalt structural ontology of world and body, (2) his notion of "original sense", or the "look," and (3) how Merleau-Ponty conceives of phenomenal body as the power to adopt such looks. I deal with (1)–(3) in the first three sections of this chapter. This leads up to my reading of the key passage remarking on normativity in Section 4, wherein I defend the interpretive claim that it is the original perceptual sense that functions as a perceptual norm, and which guides the process of an original definition of perceptual sense. Such norms, as I explain in Section 5 and 6, are then better understood as being temporal, and as being dependent on (but not reducible to) the subject's perceptual interests.

### 1. Embodied Subjectivity and Gestalt-Structural Ontology

In order to understand perceptual norms as embodied and lived, that is, as experienced by a body-subject in a bodily-intentional way that does not depend on any constructions of the modern scientific project, it will be helpful to give some clarification to how Merleau-Ponty conceives of phenomenal or lived body, which he distinguishes from objective body. Merleau-Ponty refutes the idea characterizing both empiricism and intellectualism (that is, ‘objective’ thought) that the body is merely an object among objects in the world, a *res extensa* whose parts are related merely externally and through mechanical, causal interactions with its other parts or with other objects in the world.<sup>93</sup> Such an object-body would either be passively observed by mind (a mind-made association of sensory givens channeled through the senses) in the view of empiricism, or else actively synthesized by mind via judgment under a mental concept, in the view of intellectualism. In either case, the object-body would be an *in-itself* whose functionality is unambiguously that of a vehicle for the subject, the *for-itself* we traditionally call consciousness or mind. The object-body comes into view as composed of nerves, bones, tissues, and other functional parts; it is treated as object of scientific understanding, as for example a doctor’s practice should.

In contrast, for Merleau-Ponty, it must be emphasized that the subject or “*I am my body*.”<sup>94</sup> Lived or phenomenal body is not something I, as consciousness, possess for myself. It would be more accurate to say that the world has a hold on the subject, and that the subject has a hold on the world, in virtue that subject is embodied. Body is a medium by which the subject experiences

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<sup>93</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

the world of which they are a living part.<sup>95</sup> The body is a living relation *by means of* which the subject *inhabits* (lives meaningfully in) the world.<sup>96</sup> The body allows for a subjectivity that is essentially a taking up of a point of view on the world, from somewhere in the world. The body, at the same time, is a part in the world. It is therefore open to the views of others—and also to its own view. For this reason, enigmas of the body to do with self-sensibility and reversibility of sensing and sensed, in the body itself, can be seen as referring to the fundamental ambiguity and two-sidedness of embodied being in the world, for Merleau-Ponty.<sup>97</sup>

It is this embeddedness of the subject in the world, through body, that is a condition of objective thinking in general, and of thinking about the object-body in particular. Our bodies come into view as objects of scientific understanding, or as object-bodies, not as a *given* of a mind-independent structure of reality, nor as the *result* of a synthesizing act of mind, but rather as a form of perception, dependent on the fact that the subject is a body *of* the world and thus is open to (even its own) intentional exploration. For this reason, the body is fundamentally an opening onto the world, an essential *means* of inhabiting the world, and not an obstruction to consciousness.

The body's part-ness in the world is not that of a value-neutral object whose 'properties' we would be able to better determine if the body were removed from its familiar surroundings, or

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<sup>95</sup> Perceived world, which is the same as what I have referred to as phenomenal field, is given a rough definition as follows: "the totality of perceptible things and the thing of all things... the universal style of all possible perceptions" ("The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences" in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, 351-378 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).) This definition of world is stated by contrast to the world as object of the mathematician or physicist, that is, "a kind of unified law which would cover all the partial phenomena or as a fundamental relation verifiable in all" (ibid., 93). The perceived world, for Merleau-Ponty, is "the foundation which is always presupposed by all rationality, all value, and all existence," and it "involves relations and, in a general way, a type of organization which has not been recognized by classical psychology and philosophy" (ibid., 93).

<sup>96</sup> Or rather, the subject is a "knot of living relations, and relations alone count for man", as Merleau-Ponty quotes from Saint Exupéry (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 483).

<sup>97</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 94-8. For instance, my one finger touches another finger, touches itself being touched, and the reversible touching itself can be touched.

divorced of its relevance to the first-person view. In uncovering body phenomenologically, we do not want to strip appearances off of our body through some kind of eidetic reduction to static essences (Merleau-Ponty would accuse Husserl or Descartes of this approach). Nor do we take the sterility of the scientific approach that seeks an impersonal view of the world and the physico-chemical massive bodies in it. Such an approach would be a dead-end to consciousness, since “all consciousness is perceptual.”<sup>98</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s project in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in a few words, is to “return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world” and which sustains and originates its meaning.<sup>99</sup> To re-inhabit this prior world, the phenomenal world, is to rediscover phenomena, “the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us.”<sup>100</sup> Such a philosophical act, Merleau-Ponty states, allows us to “grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organism their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history.”<sup>101</sup> The phenomenal world is the home of what Merleau-Ponty calls a pre-thetic consciousness, this operative or lived intentionality whose hold on the world is originary to that

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<sup>98</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception,” 90. Merleau-Ponty is saying here that the subjective point of view is fundamental to one that views the world as object, or in other words that that scientific consciousness is a continuation of the perceptual life-project made from the subjective point of view. Also, while the Cartesian-like depiction of objective body I am critiquing here may sound dated, I would argue that such objective/causal thinking about body is still a major philosophical influence to this day, for instance in the way human health conditions are treated without regard for subject-world relations of meaning that directly inform phenomenal body and condition our physiological systems.

<sup>99</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), 57. Henceforth I will refer to this second translation as *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. The “concrete physiognomy” referred to here is what I will be calling the perceptual unity of ‘the look,’ or original sense, when dealing with the notion in this chapter. The “individual ways of dealing with the world” of the organism, it turns out, are understood by Merleau-Ponty as perceptual norms of the organism, as I will explain presently.

of thetic consciousness, which is that intentionality supposed by idealism to posit or construct intentional objects of experience via mental acts.

Important to how the phenomenal world is said to be primary is the understanding Merleau-Ponty holds that in the perceptual world, existence is sense and sense is existence: “the miracle of the real world is that in it sense and existence are one, and that we see sense take its place in existence once and for all.”<sup>102</sup> We exist fundamentally oriented towards the world, which is a space of expression and realization of our life projects. The world of appearances or phenomena are not accidental to ideal entities in-themselves in a transcendental field, but rather, paradoxically, they are essential *means* by which embodied subject exists directed toward the world which transcends it, structured as ek-stase. In this way, the subject is paradoxically immanent in the world (embodied) and transcendent (directed away from itself as a project), in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding.<sup>103</sup>

As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

In all uses of the word *sens* [the French word translatable as ‘direction’, ‘meaning’, ‘sense’], we find the same fundamental notion of a being orientated or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are always brought back to a conception of the subject as ek-stase, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world. The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which it projects itself.<sup>104</sup>

We find ourselves and the world around us already charged with meaning (sense). This meaning is typically obscured, rather than *better* objectively determined, when consciousness

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<sup>102</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 338. Laurie Spurling remarks on how Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology claims views phenomena “as both factual (they exist for consciousness) and essential (they are meaningful for consciousness).” This is in contrast to Husserl’s phenomenology with its singular focus on the *meaning* of phenomena for consciousness (the *eidos*), which Merleau-Ponty criticizes. (*Phenomenology and the Social World* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1977), 9.)

<sup>103</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception”, 93.

<sup>104</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith), 430.

attempts to reduce it to the meaning of an isolated part—including when we reduce meaning to originating in humans as sense-bestowers (as Merleau-Ponty would accuse Sartre of doing), or when we ignore the temporal structure of experience by which the subject's meaning in the world unfolds. This is the case since meaning (sensing) is an intentional structure, a pointing to something other which is beyond or transcending the pointer.<sup>105</sup>

For instance, If I am bodily taking up the task of making a smoothie in the morning, I am bodily directed toward, I am dealing with by hand, various things or tools in the space of my kitchen, which is the world of my immediate project. I am directed toward the world in this project. The outcome of making a smoothie (which itself has further meaningful reference to the fruit and dairy industry, the rest of my day, the workout I just had and my bodily condition, and so on) is present in each movement I make. The project is structured temporally around my present experience of making the smoothie by a “protensional” relation or futural horizon of next steps to take (a directedness to possibilities open for me to take up) that is set out in my present, and with a “retentional” reference to the past steps I have already taken toward it (Merleau-Ponty is taking up Husserlian terminology, here). Subjectivity, structured as the *ek-stase* (which has the connotation of standing out in the world) is essentially this temporality and transcendence, “this projection of an indivisible power into an outcome which is already present to it.”<sup>106</sup> Across temporal structures and in each present moment, the meaning of a part of the world for a subject is dependent on a greater whole that is meaningfully structured. This whole world that is meaningfully patterned for the subject is termed a phenomenal field of meaning, its patterns “not so much copied” from the external world, “as composed” by perception, in what is an expression

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<sup>105</sup> In what was a massive shift of understanding in phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty thinks of this basic intentionality (directedness, or sense) as being *prior* to consciousness, rather than the other way around.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

of perceptual intent.<sup>107</sup> I “compose” the world of my kitchen by living in it and seeing each part of it as part of the smoothie-making, that is in reference to a whole project I have.

Merleau-Ponty argues that meanings are all rooted in the body-subject’s *perception* of the world, wherein perception is conceived as a direct, pre-reflective and practical (that is, purposeful), bodily engagement with the world, lived from the inside while entirely a part of the objective world. Merleau-Ponty draws on the notion of the gestalt (or form, structure) to build his philosophy of perception, heavily influenced by Goldstein and other Gestalt psychologists of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>108</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes of the gestalt as being “a spontaneous organization of the sensuous field which makes the alleged ‘elements’ [parts] depend on ‘wholes’ which are themselves articulated into more extended wholes.”<sup>109</sup> The gestalt is perceived as a whole that is (1) nothing more than its parts (that is, the gestalt cannot exist without being composed of its elements in sensuous matter) and yet (2) not reducible to its parts (that is, the gestalt can have properties that are not derivable from the parts alone without consideration to their functional *relationships* within the gestalt, which make up the gestalt or constitute its *formula*).<sup>110</sup> The gestalt can change in virtue of a change in just one of its parts, and it can remain the same gestalt even when all of its parts change, so long as they vary together and remain constituted by the same formula.

To illustrate the basic concept of the gestalt, we can think of hearing a melody (say, “Happy Birthday,” played on a piano in the key of G major) as a perceptible whole which is apparently

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>108</sup> In the last chapter I have already introduced the figure-ground structure (brought into phenomenology by Merleau-Ponty as the object-horizon structure), which is importantly appropriated by Merleau-Ponty from the Gestalt psychologists for his theory of perception.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Lester Embree, “Merleau-Ponty’s Examination of Gestalt Psychology,” in *Merleau-Ponty: Perception, Structure, Language*, ed. John Sallis, 89-121 (New Jersey: Humanities Press, Inc., 1981), 92.

<sup>110</sup> Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, “Image: for the eye and in mind” in *Image in Space: Contributions to a Topology of Images*, ed. Martin Nitsche, 77-96 (Germany: Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH, 2015), 7.

made up of nothing more than its individual notes. Yet this whole shapes the perception of *each* of its notes to sound like a note-in-the-melody, rather than note-in-isolation. That is, the whole gestalt of the melody “Happy birthday”, by *forming* or structuring musically the notes we hear, has a way of determining the value or musical sense of the notes within it. I hear the final note G as note-where-the-melody-is-complete, a musical reference to the whole melody. Mis-play one note, and it’s possible that the melody is recognizably no longer “Happy Birthday”: we would say the gestalt has disintegrated (or perhaps shifted to the gestalt of new tune). And yet the whole melody could be transposed to a different key (such that all the notes change in the same way), D major, and for most listeners the gestalt would remain as the *same* “Happy Birthday”, since the individual notes maintain the same internal relationships. Merleau-Ponty writes of the sensory gestalt as follows: “The form [gestalt] is a visible or sonorous configuration (or even a configuration which is prior to the distinction of the senses) in which the sensory value of each element is determined by its function in the whole and varies with it.”<sup>111</sup> What can be seen in the above example, further, is that the gestalt form of the melody is subjective—it directly refers to the perceiving subject in its meaning. The melody is not a melody in-itself, but a perceptual sense; the perceiver is a meaningful part of the whole gestalt without which it cannot be said to exist as that melody.

Importantly, the perceptual gestalt is ontologically basic in Merleau-Ponty’s view<sup>112</sup>, such that the sensory and perceptual field is made up only of nested gestalts, at various degrees of

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<sup>111</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, tr. Alden L. Fischer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 168.

<sup>112</sup> This is the case at least up to *Phenomenology of Perception*, with which I am concerned in this thesis. His project in the later works of his life was to express an original ontology of the flesh, moving away from thinking of being definitively in terms of gestalt.

integration; the world is made up of “more or less stable, more or less articulated” gestalts.<sup>113</sup>

There is no perception of sensuous matter that is not to some extent *formed*: “in each perception, ... it is the matter itself that takes on sense and form.”<sup>114</sup> As indicated previously this forming is dependent on the form-*ing* of an embodied subject, to some degree.<sup>115</sup>

The implication that there are only gestalts is that our existence is always an involvement in the gestalt structure of the world; and insofar as we are meaningful parts moving and changing our orientation in the world, we structure or form it. Our embodied existence and movement through the world can be seen as an integration of perceptual gestalts here, a disintegration of perceptual gestalts there, a shifting from one perceptual gestalt to another in my perspective there; or in other words, as we live we make sense, we do not make sense, we make this sense or that sense of something.

As embodied perceivers, we are parts of the world rather than detached onlookers, such that the gestalts we perceive would not *be* the gestalts we perceive without our perceptive participation in them. Thus, the meaning of the world, as form or gestalt, is neither completely subject-constituted (as Sartre would have it), nor can it exist entirely independently of the subject. Because we are fundamentally present to a world, we are “condemned to sense” by existence, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. This meaning is form that perception finds us involved with, that forms us, and by which we structure the world down to the most basic level of existence.<sup>116</sup>

In this way, Merleau-Ponty has adapted the conception of the gestalt from the Gestalt psychologists. Gestalt thinking, before-hand, was not developed for existential analysis but rather

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Ted Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/merleau-ponty/>>.

<sup>114</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 338.

<sup>115</sup> “There is no world without an Existence that sustains its structure [man]... there is no world without a being in the world”: Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith), 432.

<sup>116</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxiii-lxxxiv.

as a set of principles for incorporating meaning into psychology (still with naturalist presuppositions, which Merleau-Ponty criticizes). Merleau-Ponty adapts the gestalt as a basic principle of structuration of our embodied experience. Gestalt, in Merleau-Ponty's use, is not the static 'form' of a mathematical formula or an engineer's blueprint. Rather it is a dynamic forming that the perceiver participates in and is receptive to, in virtue of body. This helps us to better understand the claim that existence is sense and sense is existence, owing to embodied subjectivity.

We can also now better see Merleau-Ponty's claim that meaning, and hence existence, is never unambiguous.<sup>117</sup> Meaning can never be understood fully; meaning must form beyond our view, given that the perceptual world is composed of nested gestalts in which we show up, some place. We experience this necessity as the indeterminacy or horizon of meaning that any perspective on sense appears with. Perspective, which (as previously mentioned) Merleau-Ponty explicitly defines as this object-horizon structure, is an *access to* or *opening onto* a meaningfully structured world that transcends the subject.<sup>118</sup> Simultaneously, embodied perspective entails necessarily a limitation on our ability to make sense of our experience, since meaning necessarily transcends the subject, as gestalt structure of which we are a mere part. As O'Neil puts it, "The phenomenon of perspective reveals a synthesis of immanence and transcendence which contains the ambiguity of perception. For the perceived thing exists only insofar as I perceive it, and yet its being is never exhausted by the view I have of it. It is this simultaneous presence and absence

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<sup>117</sup> When I use the term ambiguous in Merleau-Ponty, I mean specifically the idea that we can have two or more different views and yet recognize that they are of the same (one) entity. For example, the concept of phenomenal body is ambiguous because we can take an objective and a subjective view on the same phenomenal body, as I showed at the beginning of the chapter.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 4.

that is required for ‘something’ to be perceived at all.”<sup>119</sup> Mind, and the abstract significations by which it claims to operate, still cannot escape perspectivity. Ambiguity of the perspective is said by Merleau-Ponty to be the definition of consciousness or existence, and not an imperfection in them.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, the meaning of parts of the world can never be fully determinate to a body-subject, because they are, fundamentally, meaningfully embedded in further structures that are not fully in sight (and in which our body is implicated in, since we are perceiving them). And yet these horizons of indeterminate meaning necessarily provide an implicit reference to a whole, and to the most general meaning, the horizon of all horizons which is the natural world itself. I can look at any thing—a wooden chair, say—and since it will be based in sensuous matter as its elemental parts, I will be able to perceive it at its widest generality of sense, as a part of nature appearing in a moment of natural time that Merleau-Ponty says is the history of the whole universe. I can also view it as being a generic part of the world, to which universal laws of physics apply.

Time itself, moreover, is itself a gestalt or forming horizontal structure that any experiencing subject plays a formative part in: “time and significance are but one thing.”<sup>121</sup> That is, the objective time that “flows by and exists part by part would not even be suspected if it were not enveloped by a historical time that is projected from the living present toward a past and toward a future,” which is its horizontal structure.<sup>122</sup> The world as a whole, in the entirety of its

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<sup>119</sup> John O’Neill, *Perception, Expression, and History: The Social Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 16.

<sup>120</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith), 332.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 426. Cf. also 430-2 for an elaboration of Merleau-Ponty’s gestalt structural and existential definitions of the terms ‘time,’ and ‘meaning.’ For instance, on 430 he summarizes: “Our analysis of time has confirmed, initially, this new notion of significance and understanding. Considering it [time] in the same light as any other object, we shall be obliged to say of it what we have said of other objects: that it has meaning for us only because it is ‘what we are.’ We can designate something by this word only because we belong to past, present, and future. It is literally the *sens* of our life, and, like the world, is accessible only to the person who has his place within it, and who follows its direction.”

<sup>122</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 348.

appearances, never fails to appear, casting a certain sense or value onto its parts, analogous to the effect we saw of the melody bearing sense on each of its notes as listened to. Hearing an individual note, we hear ‘the melody’ (and tacitly and in a deeper sense, we perceive our body’s listening); perceiving any object we perceive its horizon of meaning and thus the world (and in the background, the tacitly revealed sense of our necessarily embodied subjectivity). The body is thus not causally implicated in perception nor an accidental occurrence in the world of objects. The body for Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental body in that it is logical condition of the possibility of experience. It is a necessity for there being experience of meaning and a world. And yet, body is essentially immanent, this immanence being the condition of existence and of lived experience.

Given the dialectical interaction of part-whole that shapes any meaning, if there is a causality between organism and environment it must be conceived as a *circular causality* and based on mutually forming perceptual intentionality, as opposed to a linear and mechanical causality.<sup>123</sup> The intentionality I have been discussing, likewise, is not fundamentally conceived by Merleau-Ponty as being a fixed binary relation between consciousness and content. Original perceptual experience is conceived as being a projection of what Merleau-Ponty, at times, calls an intentional *arc* that “projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation”, the sense of which are mutually

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<sup>123</sup> As Michael Smith states the notion, “This circular causality, the mutual interference of subject and object, mind and matter, is not an exceptional case but the norm, and the necessary condition of lived experience.” (Michael B. Smith, “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson, trans. ed. Michael B. Smith, 192-211 (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 194). This is closely related to Husserl’s conception of the *Fundierung* relation that is a mutual foundation between part and whole, discussed in *Logical Investigations*, and which Merleau-Ponty takes up to understand the relation between pre-reflective consciousness and what I will discuss presently as its *sedimentation*, which is its determinate manifestation in reflection (i.e., the perception: thought relation). Cf. *Phenomenology of Perception* 414-5 for Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the *Fundierung* relation.

formative.<sup>124</sup> This arc is the intentional projection of sense that “creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity”, ensuring we are situated.<sup>125</sup> Only with the lived experience of such an open intentionality can the subject develop the consciousness which experiences itself to be intending an object in the sense of a fixed binary relation.

What has been essential to this account of phenomenal body and its oriented being-in-the-world is that body is ambiguous, appearing in a sense as object and in a more fundamental sense as subject. I prefer the term ‘living relation’ to refer to the body at the pre-reflective level of existence, to emphasize that subject *lives directed toward* an object beyond them in an intentional relation of meaning (sensing), which is never fully limited to a part of the world, nor fully meaningful, in relation to the world. This emphasis on living relation is to emphasize the non-static gestalt of an embodied perceptual relation, a relation of meaning which is not reducible to subject and/or object as mutually exclusive terms.

Merleau-Ponty conceives of objects of the human world as being embodiments of perceptual intentions that are unified as gestalts and experienced as “physiognomies,” based on their sense and the power my body invests in that sense (that is, in forming the sense). These perceptual objects are unified as gestalts, which are subjective, rather than on any basis of some status as an independent “thing” with determinate properties. Merleau-Ponty says, for instance:

The sentiment and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually exclusive terms.... it is my gaze which subtends colour, and the movement of my hand which subtends the object's form, or rather my gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith), 214.

In the *Structure of Behaviour*, he says, “The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject... are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole,” which is a sensible form.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, characteristic of objects in the human world is that they have a multiplicity of meanings to the subject, corresponding to the multiplicity of possible perceptual intentions the body can invest in them. Our intentional way of being in the world is not that of the “I think” ofthetic or act consciousness, which would typically emphasize a single, definitive meaning of mental involvement; rather we are bodily oriented toward meaning in the world as what Husserl calls the “I can” of motor intentionality, through which we intend object-horizon structures as open to various possible meaningful ways of moving, inhabiting, and taking up the world across various existential dimensions.

For an illustration of this notion, we can see that I perceive my chair as having several dimensions of meaning, and several possible ways I can perceive it. The chair is a personal significance to me if it was a gift from a proud parent (this may be said to be an emotional value). It is economic significance that can (supposedly) be measured in standard units of economic value. It is a practical value in that I habitually sit on the chair as a means to eat dinner (this is a practical purpose, which is essential to there being a shared concept of ‘chair’). The chair may also be perceived as aesthetic meaning in the way it looks aesthetically pleasing to me. The chair may have further meanings, including scientific or cognitive meanings. Some meanings are more explicitly shared among subjects, and have a language developed to express them, while some are more private and express their meaning to me more tacitly. None of these meanings are without reference to an interest of some kind, or to a wider project in which the

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<sup>127</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 13.

chair (and my relation to it) are implicated and mutually shaped by.<sup>128</sup> This is in virtue of the fact that the chair is a meaningful whole in which its objective ‘properties’ are formed by, and form, my projects (in a way not entirely separable or reducible to the ‘parts’ themselves). *What* meanings and relations to other things in the world this whole refers to is indeterminate, as the reference is horizontal and the whole world is on the perceptual horizon of horizons (this is particularly true if I look at my chair so as to ground us both in the natural world as modifications of the natural world, which is the ground of all existence).

## 2. The ‘Look’ as Original Perceptual Unity of Sense

Merleau-Ponty often uses the term ‘look’ (or in the passage above, ‘gaze’, or ‘movement’) to convey the original, embodied sense relation he has in mind by which the embodied subject inhabits the world.<sup>129</sup> While this notion ‘look’ does not refer strictly to the something visual, we can take the ordinary sense that when the subject *looks* at something, both the looking face and

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<sup>128</sup> I’ve adapted this example from one made about the various meanings of a pen, in Matthews, *Merleau-Ponty*, 35-6.

<sup>129</sup> I am using ‘look’ to refer to an instance of the immanent sense Merleau-Ponty thinks of as a basic element or unit of the perceptual world. I think ‘style’ is understood along similar lines to ‘look’, and in fact these words are often used interchangeably, by Merleau-Ponty (although this does not play a very important part in the argument I am making here). The ‘look’ or ‘style’, I believe, attempts to capture something like the Merleau-Pontyan equivalent of what for other philosophers is the essence, or the indivisible core components comprising what is, and which we seek when we seek to most fundamentally understand a thing (he speaks of ‘concrete essences’ interchangeably with structure and style (*Phenomenology of Perception* 127, 123; Jeannette Hicks, “When The Trees Look Back: Reversibility and the Genesis of Sense in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Art” (MA diss., The University of Guelph, 2013), 29-39 gives an overview of the notion which confirms this reading). The term ‘look’ emphasizes that we are referring to perceptual unities, which are grasped directly by body in perception, unmediated by mental representations. The ‘look’ is a gestalt, which is ontologically basic. The ‘look’ is open in that it appears on a horizon and corresponds in a gestalt-structured way to a world it is a part of. Since there are only gestalts and existing gestalts refer to perceivers, just as perceivers refer to what exists, ‘looks’ (or styles, or concrete essences) only exist in perceptual relation to body-subjects. This openness structure allows for exploration of the same ‘look’ through experience of it from various perspectives, which the subject takes (or, adopts) on the look. The look can be sensed in relation to a background of sensibles it is meaningfully related to. In this way, the look can be said to show up at varying levels of generality or particularity, or at various stages of temporal elaboration. On principle of the embodiedness of the look, it cannot be sensed in isolation from all else it is meaningfully related to. This understanding of the ‘look’ refers to Samantha Matherne’s account discussed last chapter of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of style (cf. Matherne, “Style as the key”). My interest in this chapter is in using what I take to be this non-controversial reading of Merleau-Ponty on ‘the look’, or original embodied sense, as a way to understand the connection between perceptual constancy and normativity.

the face of the thing looked at are internally related by a certain meaning conveyed. The ‘look’, as I use the term in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, refers to a relation forming a perceptual whole whose existence is due, in part, to the body’s invested power in sensing.

This original sense, which Merleau-Ponty calls a “primitive object of perception,” is a gestalt structural unity, its mode of existence described by the gestalt notion of form.<sup>130</sup> Gestalt structuration being ontologically basic for Merleau-Ponty such that only form exists, taken with the fact that forms exist only as consisting in sensuous matter, the original sense becomes an important notion by which Merleau-Ponty can express an originary mode of existence for the traditionally-understood ‘thing’ or ‘object’ of the cultural world. That is, what exists must exist in the perceptual world, and the perceptual world is the home of these original senses: therefore, “the truth is that there are no things, only physiognomies.” The ‘look’ is an *immanent* or *embodied sense* available immediately to the subject, prior to the separation of subject’s interest and object’s property that might occur later, when we reflect on the look. The emphasis is that the look is lived or experienced as a reality, rather than represented or “known as a true object”: “the representation of the objects of nature and of their qualities, the consciousness of truth, belong to a higher dialectic,” says Merleau-Ponty.<sup>131</sup>

I see my friend’s angry look on her face and gestures, and as my body registers the anger, I immediately sense the anger there, in the very expression. The anger is not some internal mental state of my friend that accidentally becomes translated somehow through the body, as a second-order appearance which I then take as representative by which to infer the meaning of the anger. My recognizing the anger is possible in virtue of my body taking up a corresponding

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<sup>130</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 168.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

perceptual attitude to the anger, a meaningful bodily response to anger (and anger is likely communicable in such a way if my body is familiar with this emotion, that is, structured so as to be open to being angry in the same way, itself).

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty returns to this fundamental notion, initially introduced in the *Structure of Behaviour*, that the perceptual world is structured as unities of embodied sense. He contrasts this original sense with its mind-conceived derivate, the ‘signification’ whose definition is mediated by abstract concepts:

We uncovered, beneath act or thetic intentionality- and in fact as its very condition of possibility- an operative intentionality already at work prior to every thesis and every judgment; we discovered a “Logos of the aesthetic world,” or a “hidden art in the depths of the human soul,” and that, like every art, only knows itself in the results. And from that point forward, the distinction we made elsewhere between structure and signification was clarified: what constitutes the difference between the Gestalt of the circle and the signification ‘circle’ is that the latter is recognized by an understanding that engenders it as the place of equidistant points from a center, while the former is recognized by a subject who is familiar with his world and capable of grasping it as a modulation of this world, as a circular physiognomy. The only way we have of knowing what a painting is and what a thing is, is by looking at them, and their signification is only revealed if we look at them from a certain point of view, from a certain distance, and in a certain direction [*sens*], in short, if we put our involvement with the world at the service of the spectacle.<sup>132</sup>

The look itself is essentially horizontal, opening indeterminately to intend the world.<sup>133</sup>

And yet the look is a meaning that does not lose itself entirely in the world: it is look with a certain form, with familiar onlookers, which are the immediate surroundings which provide a setting for it to look a certain way. The situation the look is in, in being gestalt-structured and in virtue of the look inhabiting this structure, serves to *form* the look and to find the look’s unique definition. Important to getting a sense of how Merleau-Ponty thinks of the *definition* of original

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<sup>132</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 453. That this original sense unity is formed by a “*certain* point of view, from a *certain* distance, and in a *certain* direction” (emphasis mine) previews an important connection to the phenomenon of perceptual normativity which I will discuss presently.

<sup>133</sup> This was the point made by Matherne in “Style as the key” about style, which I take to refer to the same notion.

sense in the phenomenal field are his notions of levelling and anchoring. The look is said to be anchored, an anchoring which unfolds according to a certain spatial level.

I read Merleau-Ponty to understand spatial levels as gestalts that are integrated to include the body and its immediate surroundings, such that the subject is able to explore possible meanings in the immediate space, always relative to the life of body-subject (and hence the situation is said to be ‘lived in’ or ‘inhabited’), while remaining anchored or oriented relative to certain stable points of reference beyond it. For instance, as we look around a room, making sense of the arrangement of things in relation to each other, we make use of the references to *up*, *down*, *forward*, *backward*. (For example: I bring *down* the blender from the cupboard, I pull the yogurt *forward* from the *back* of the fridge). My bodily sense of these anchors is not set by a necessary *a priori* form or anything in objective space. My sense is related to the looks of the ceiling, floor, and walls of the room, relative to my body. These looks are intentional unities forming basic directions (themselves related in a gestalt with respect to each other), which need to be set, investing a meaningful hold on my body, in order for the subject to further project their gaze to ‘find’ things around the room. This leveling of a normal room provides an overall coherence or formation to the environment around the subject, related to the body’s capacities to move and act, and sense in general. That is, the setting is of directed bodily intentionality in-the-world, which includes what Merleau-Ponty calls operative or act intentionality, and more generally the motor intentionality which relates to the world in an attitude of the ‘I can’. This allows the setting to be bodily accessible to further exploration, which will unfold on this level, and not on, say, another level that is ‘upside-down’ relative to this one. The body’s motor-intentional orientation is not ordinarily that of “I can go there, to an isolated and dislocated

place”, but rather that of “I can go up that ladder to the ceiling” or “I can navigate the kitchen to make the smoothie”: it orients with an anchored and levelled sense of space.

That the spatial level is a gestalt phenomenon becomes apparent when the level shifts and takes on new sense as a whole. This phenomenon has been produced in experimental conditions where a subject observes a room through a tilted mirror (which makes everything in the room appear slanted at first) and their orientation adjusts to correct verticality.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, a level shift is what happens when our visual field flips to make sense of itself after a period of time wearing eye-glasses that flip the visual field upside-down.<sup>135</sup>

We also see this level-shift phenomenon in the way our eyes and bodies ‘adjust’ to what Merleau-Ponty calls the ‘lighting level’ in a room, such that we see things in the room as having a certain colour value relative to the whole ‘colour setting’ set by the lighting level. We should understand this lighting level as the meaningful whole of the light and colour in the room that is nothing more than, but also irreducible to, its parts (coloured things, eyes, and lighting sources in the room—in other words, things our body can perceive as open to a light or colour-sense with my eyes and seeing capacities). The lighting level may be anchored in certain definitive colours or lights—the main lamp in relation to my eyes, say. In its role as anchor, the main lamp’s lighting serves as a sense that recedes into the background: it is perceived as more or less colour-neutral when best functioning as an anchor.<sup>136</sup>

In fact, the anchor must appear on the horizon as opposed to as a central object of my focus, since from the horizon it can allow other things in the room to better show up. (A room whose main source of light was a strobe light, for instance, would draw attention to itself as a

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<sup>134</sup> This experiment is described in *Phenomenology of Perception*, 259-60. It shows how verticality is a sense subjectively defined, in reference to the body.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 254-7.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 324.

focal phenomenon and distract from a subject's ability to see anything but the strobe light's effect on the visual field, and hence would not be a good anchor. Such a lighting would make the room uninhabitable, or at least quite difficult to bodily navigate for everyday purposes.) Still, even if the anchor tends to hide on the horizon of our perceptions, the anchor can only function as such by being present in the field. It cannot disappear from experience: a main lamp must be on the lighting level I am engaged in, or else it cannot serve as anchor. In this way the anchor, I think, is a notion that does what Kelly's 'background' features of experience did. An important way that my interpretation differs from Kelly's is that I will not think of perceptual norms as being limited to the background or horizon of any given perspective.

Last chapter, in the example of attempting to look at the colour of a green wall with shadows on it to best see the wall's constant colour, I mentioned how there is a fundamental ambiguity as to whether it is the lighting, my own body, or else the object that leads my gaze: "The lighting directs my gaze and leads me to see the object, so in one sense it [the lighting] *knows* and *sees* the object"<sup>137</sup>; "finally one cannot say if it is the look or the things that command."<sup>138</sup> It is possible simultaneously for a *part* or element of my visual field, for instance a spot on the wall that shows the colour green in a particular way relative to others, as well as the *overall* lighting level my visual field is nested in, to direct my gaze and develop the look of the green wall. Such dynamics are structurally understandable as a part-whole dialectic of the nested gestalts, levelling being one such term of Merleau-Ponty's used to describe this. This movement or 'directing to the colour of the wall' is bodily perception of sense. It is active-passive for the subject insofar as various levels of gestalts intertwine, referring to their component parts (their internal horizons) and to gestalts beyond (their outer horizons) which they play a part in.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>138</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133.

### 3. The Body as the Power to Adopt Looks

So far, we have that the look is fundamentally a particular way of inhabiting the phenomenal world; and that it is a whole not reducible to looker and looked, but rather a living relation between them, given that the subject is in-the-world and already directed (already looking). The phenomenal body *adopts* looks; as Landes says it is “the power to adopt styles.”<sup>139</sup> This indicates that the body must be open to becoming formed and oriented to the looks in the world around it, in order to perceive. Merleau-Ponty speaks of ‘gearing into’ as the body’s capacity to be configured in such a motor or operative- intentional way to access the looks which are open in the phenomenal field. Moreover, the phenomenal body is at times referred to as virtual body, in order to emphasize that it a nexus of powers or possibilities to ‘gear into’ the world on various levels, modalities, and senses. This original bodily intentionality, it can be stressed here, is not an abstract ‘directing’ toward a fixed ideal sense, but rather a motor power to move the body coordinately as a multisensory unity, in virtue of being geared into different perceptual gestalts.<sup>140</sup>

To better unpack this conception of body being a power to adopt looks, I will examine what is going on when we see particular colours. Merleau-Ponty describes the perception of different colours as being based on different perceptual attitudes (or looks) the body adopts in order to ‘gear into’ the opportunities the world affords. In seeing blue, for instance, the subject can adopt a blue attitude: “prior to being an objective spectacle, the quality allows itself to be recognized by a type of behaviour that intends it essentially, and this is why I obtain a quasi-

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<sup>139</sup> Landes, *The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary*, 157.

<sup>140</sup> Although the notion is not directly relevant to my account, Merleau-Ponty also conceives of a habit-body, which refers to body’s practical knowhow, and by which body is able to acquire new meaningful skills that incorporate the use of tools and cultural objects. Habit-body opens new ways of gearing into the world and of shaping our projects and the world itself. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143-4.

presence of blue from the moment my body adopts the blue attitude.”<sup>141</sup> Merleau-Ponty presents the sensing of blue as a communication of question and response, or interrogation, between sensing and sensed. I adopt the particular “attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate and to become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation.”<sup>142</sup>

This original process is not one of linear causality based on external interactions between sensed and sensing, by which we could break down experience into discrete parts, such as eye and pigmentation of paint. Doing so would break the sense of the whole, which is the original sense of the form, the ‘blue look’. I *find* the sense blue as a solicitation to move my body in the blue attitude, which is different from how my body moves in the red attitude, or for looking at any other colour.<sup>143</sup> This finding or adopting of the blue sense is the power of embodied subjectivity: the ‘blue look’ is really movements of body in relation to an opportunity for blue. As indicated in the last quotation by Merleau-Ponty, phenomenal body can operate the power to adopt the blue look given even just an opportunity to perceptively *imagine* blue in their phenomenal field (which is the quasi-present sensing mentioned in the last quotation).

Consider the painter sitting in front of a landscape with her painting materials, and momentarily looking at the blue paint in her tray. Her body is in the phenomenal field with the ‘I can’ orientation to possibilities of motion, and has found an opening at the ‘blue level’, or in other words an opportunity to perceive blue in the paint. Her body, in correlation with the paint,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 219. In the Merleau-Pontyan context, the term ‘behaviour’ is used to refer to an organism’s typical meaningful perceptual involvements with the world. The notion is introduced in *The Structure of Behaviour*, where Merleau-Ponty intends it as neutral with respect to the empiricism/intellectualism, naturalist/mentalist sets of traditional views on perceptual life. Behaviour is that of a living body, meaningfully oriented to sense, via gestalt structures. Behaviour is not reducible to causal interactions between parts of the objective world.

<sup>142</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 222.

<sup>143</sup> The bodily attitudes of different colours are described at *ibid.*, 216-9.

adopts the ‘blue look,’ forming the sense of blue itself and seeing it through the structure of perspective, by which it appears as related to various possible meanings of the sense of blue that appear on her perceptual horizon (while looking at the paint in her tray, she might indeterminately see brushstrokes she could make with the paint, the blue of the sky, the blending of blue with other colours on the canvas, the painting as a whole, the thickness of the paint, her own mood, and so on), in a radiation of meaning opened up by the look. The original blue look is not merely an ideal act, and nor is the blue restricted to a location in the paint in-itself. To show this, I would point out how the blue look can be seen on the posture of her body itself—the same body that is physico-chemical body in objective space, even. Suppose, to see how the blue looks, we turn from the paint in the tray itself to the painter’s body in objective space (that is, her body as the scientist would approach it). We can adjust to see, Merleau-Ponty would say, the origin of the one blue look in her body’s way of looking at blue—and this would be difficult to see, though perceptible to the subject that looks closely enough at the painter, and who knows how to look (personally, I would employ some background knowledge of physics and attempt to find the echo of blue in one possible way, which would be to look on the surface her eyes for a reflection of blue in my visual field; an experienced painter might find the blue look in a deeper sense).

This *bodily* adoption of the ‘blue look’ is what makes possible subject’s being able to gear into blue, out in the world. And yet, the ‘blue look’ being *bodily* is a tacit or background feature in relation to the way we naturally think to look for ‘the blue she sees’ in her situation, which would be to locate blue somewhere beside her and eventually in the tray, where we see her body (and eyes in particular) gazing out toward. We look for blue in a restricted direction guided by where we presuppose it to exist, in the world outside of the subject. Such a tendency (in this case, to follow her gaze) is natural for the human subject, Merleau-Ponty would say, given that

the painter's bodily attitude is fundamentally directed away from her toward a sense (or in other words, her meaningful direction to blue is transcendent).

I describe this situation to illustrate the bodily adoption of the 'blue look', and how for Merleau-Ponty, we naturally tend to look past body, in sensing the world; we point to an object of meaning beyond body (this is comparable to the tendency of objective thinking). But the body's own involvement in looking blue is not an accident on the way to getting past appearances to a blue-in-itself (or a thing-in-itself behind the blue), because there is no 'constant,' determinate 'blue' quality that exists beyond forming gestalt structures. There is no 'blue' that is inseparable from a horizon of other meanings of blue (including my body). My body is a means of looking blue. I can see the same blue in a range of situations, because my body is a power to adopt, and live, the blue look. To 'invert' the direction of our natural tendency of consciousness to objective thinking is the Husserlian notion Merleau-Ponty adopts to characterizes the essential shift involved in phenomenological thought.<sup>144</sup> Such an inversion would turn to look at *body pointing* as opposed to following the direction of *pointing body*; or, in terms of the example I just discussed, the original sense would be found in *blue-looking body* as opposed to *blue-looking paint*.

Understanding embodied perception this way—that it is a power of the phenomenal body to adopt styles of the world insofar as it is meaningfully integrated in, and open to, the nested gestalts of the world (with a motor intentionality that intends 'I can')—we can revisit the phenomenon of perceptual constancy that is supposedly experienced when I look at the green of my living room wall. In the framing of this as a constancy phenomenon, I perceive this green as constantly the *same* green, despite variation in lighting or other contextual features by which it

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<sup>144</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 220.

appears. The approach to Merleau-Ponty's thinking about such a phenomenon of colour constancy, despite lighting variation, will need to be made in terms of there being a 'green look' that is structurally typical to the sense of this situation.

#### 4. A Key Passage: From Perceptual Constancy to Perceptual Normativity

Merleau-Ponty, recall from last chapter, most clearly expresses his view of perceptual normativity in the 'Perceptual Constants' section that begins Part II: 'The Thing and the Natural World,' of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Here he connects perceptual constancy, and the question of how objects and properties are perceptually determined, to his comments on perceptual normativity. I will now trace Merleau-Ponty's argument in this specific passage to present how I think we should view perceptual normativity as functioning in Merleau-Ponty's thought. This is a reading that will bring the overall picture I have developed thus far, in this chapter, to bear on the text where Merleau-Ponty describes perception as normative.

Merleau-Ponty puts forward his own view on the problem of perceptual constancy, which his view on normativity is introduced relative to, after considering alternately the empiricist and intellectualist ways of posing the problem of perceptual constancy. The intellectualist approach to perceptual constancy, for instance, involves the subject's positing a "world as a rigorously connected system" of appearances, such that the constant "true size or form" are "merely the constant law according to which appearance, distance, and orientation vary."<sup>145</sup> The subject's mental activity imposes an invariable law of relations, an *a priori* form, on the world. This law itself is the *real* thing which never itself appears. But if appearances vary according to a law, Merleau-Ponty says, this would imply that they could be treated as measurable sizes, and thus that they are already, implicitly, being treated as determinate. Whereas the question, if we are not

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 315.

to presuppose an objective world, is precisely to understand *how* appearances become determinate.

Thus Merleau-Ponty moves from the question of perceptual constancy to the question of determinacy: “the question of knowing how there are true, objective, or real forms or sizes for us is reduced to the question of knowing how there are determinate forms for us”.<sup>146</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s response to this second question, of how forms become determinate for us, brings him back to his view that perception is embodied and structured: that the subject-body participates as a part in dynamic *gestalt* forms. These forms, which are living and moving (as opposed to ahistorical or invariant) relations constituting the world, are not determined *a priori*. The forms allow for an “evidentness of the thing,” an embodied sense or ‘look’, that grounds what scientific thought might come to view as any “constant relations” in the world.

For instance, take the ‘real size’ of a table conceived as “constant product of distance multiplied by apparent size,” which according to the intellectualist would define what the constant measurable size of an object is through various apparent sizes as the table is seen at different distances and the corresponding angles of projection on the retina.<sup>147</sup> Merleau-Ponty claims that without an original sense of a defined form and size of the table, which is immediately evident, we would never presume a change in form or size corresponding to changes in direction or orientation of the object.<sup>148</sup> Geometric space originates from lived space. Thus, what we should identify as the ‘real’ constant size or form we perceive are not the determinate conceptions of a subject. Nor does the constant size or form exist independently of the subject. The actually existing ‘form’ allowing for a defined stable sense is a dynamic

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 315.

gestalt form that include the embodied subject. The forms being actively ‘determined’ in perception are instances of embodied sense: they are perceptual unities which I have been calling ‘look’ or original sense.<sup>149</sup>

Object constancy regarded in the traditional intellectualist way, as explicable in terms of constancy of relations prior to or behind ‘appearances’, is only conceivable because of lived body, by means of which we perceive the world. Embodied perception implies an object-horizon structure that allows for us to make out a focal point, its sense more or less definable to perception only because, paradoxically, it has an indeterminate horizon of meanings. This is explained as follows by Merleau-Ponty:

... there are determinate forms (like ‘a square,’ ‘a diamond’ or an actual spatial configuration) for us because our body, as a point of view upon things, and things, as abstract elements of a single world, form a system where each moment is immediately significative of all the others. A certain orientation of my gaze in relation to the object signifies a certain appearance of the object and a certain appearance of the objects nearby.<sup>150</sup>

The question of determinacy recalls earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the figure-ground structure, which the Gestalt psychologists will say is “the most basic sensible given we can have”, is in fact “the very definition of the perceptual phenomenon, or that without which a phenomenon could not be called perception.”<sup>151</sup> We see, by the definition of perception as Merleau-Ponty conceives it, “a perceptual ‘something’ ... always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a ‘field.’”<sup>152</sup> These structural matters are the focal point of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and this is why a fresh taking-up of the problem of perceptual constancy brings us to the question of determinacy, definition, and

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<sup>149</sup> This point about Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of constancy phenomenon is so far in agreement with the main point of Matherne’s interpretation in “Style as the Key,” which I presented in the last chapter.

<sup>150</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 314.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

thus structure: he insists that “structure of actual perception alone can tell us what it is to perceive.”<sup>153</sup>

In the case of perceptual constancy of size, Merleau-Ponty says that for the one perceiving, the constant relation supposedly establishable between projection on retina and my distance to the object is actually *not* perceived as constant in the immediate sense.<sup>154</sup> In fact, the object (and presumably its size) looks more or less *real*, as experienced distance varies. Rather than claiming that we perceive a constant property such as size through variation in appearance or ‘ways of looking’ that size, Merleau-Ponty claims that what is constant through the perceptual process is a reference to a *certain* perception of the object, which the perception tends towards. This perception is bodily-intended, and such an intention assures an underlying perceptual unity to the process:

[The] object at a hundred paces is not present and real in the sense the object at ten paces is, and I identify the object in all of its positions, at all of its distances, and through all of its appearances, insofar as all of the perspectives converge toward the perception that I obtain for a certain typical distance and orientation. This privileged perception assures the unity of the perceptual process and gathers all of the other appearances into itself.<sup>155</sup>

What is constant to perception of the object—that which our perception tends to or converges towards through perspective variation—is being put forth by Merleau-Ponty as a suggested *norm*: the “certain typical distance and orientation”, or “privileged perception.” We must notice at this point that the norm is introduced in terms of meaningful relations: distance

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>154</sup> I will not elaborate on the connection to perceptual constancy of colour, sound, and other entities. These are discussed in this section beyond the passage I am looking at here, where normativity comes up. Later on, for instance, Merleau-Ponty says that “the decisive factor in the phenomenon of constancy... is the articulation of the whole field, the richness and sharpness of its structure” (ibid., 321). So, like I have made the point here, the constancy phenomenon in general will not be solved by objective thinking that distinguishes appearances as opposed to ‘real’ or ‘true’ objects, but rather by a return to original sense in the phenomenal field.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 315

and orientation are meant in the pre-objective or phenomenal sense, rather than as already-determined quantities or meaningless, given qualities.

This last passage leads Merleau-Ponty right to the his most explicit articulation of his view on perceptual normativity, wherein the *certain* and *typical* distance and orientation are now described as *optimal* distance, and in terms of *maximum* of visibility:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen—an orientation through which it presents more of itself—beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point, which is obtained through a certain an equilibrium between the interior and exterior horizons.<sup>156</sup>

I want to emphasize that in reading this specific passage in its context, we see that Merleau-Ponty is led to normativity while making a specific critical move in relation to the question of perceptual constancy. What the philosophers traditionally concerned with the ‘constancy phenomena’ have considered ‘constant’—the ‘real’ or ‘determinate’ thing, are revealed to be secondary to a pre-reflective and embodied, original sense. The so-called problem faced of reconciling incompatible perceptual features of constancy and change, appearance and reality, is essentially diverted by Merleau-Ponty, as opposed to solved through explanation, by a return to the original experience of sense which he insists is primary and prior to the problem itself. Merleau-Ponty is motivating a return to original sense, via an opportunity to insist on its structure in embodied perception. Here the opportunity is the traditionalist failed solutions to their ill-posed problem of perceptual constancy.

This original sense, we can understand, is one that body can take up in virtue of it being a power for adopting certain ‘looks’. It is ‘the look’ that structures a stable sense in so-called

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 315-6. The description of perceptual normativity here continues in the same light, in terms of the ‘living value’ of the body revealed by the look we have of it neither from too close or too far, which I discussed last chapter.

perceptual constancy scenarios. This stable sense of ‘the look’, in addition to being defined (a certain, or typical form), *also*, or *furthermore*, exhibits the phenomenon of perceptual normativity (it appears as an ‘optimal’ look or point of ‘maximum visibility’). The sense here is that his look is what our perception always tends to; hence it is guiding perception as a perceptual norm. The ‘optimality’ or ‘maximality’ of the norm, we must keep in mind, is for Merleau-Ponty a meaningful pre-objective relation which could not be determined without having the object in front of subject and a bodily taking it up. To be clear, ‘optimal’ and ‘maximum’ are not to be understood as a determinate feature of an object or even of my body’s perception of the object, as it would be along the lines of objectivist thought—I think this misreading is an easy trap to fall into, especially if the above passage on normativity is read out of context. I think Merleau-Ponty must be read as introducing a new phenomenal sense of normativity itself, rather than making a claim that rests squarely on traditional connotations of the words ‘optimal’ or ‘maximum’.

If we want to ask what *is* the norm, then, we must avoid the tendency to leap to interpreting the norm as an object for consciousness whose constancy, or law-like way of unifying the perceptual process, could be made sense of abstract from any actual situation. We end up with an pre-objective sense of the norm, its pre-objectivity understood along the same lines as original sense itself. Such an original notion of normativity reveals Merleau-Ponty’s core claim that subject is essentially embodied.

To sum up this discussion, my reading showed that what was first the *typical* distance or orientation our perception tends toward, the original sense assuring perceptual unity, then became described as the *optimal* distance or orientation our perception tends towards. The norm, *as* ‘look,’ should then (I claim) be conceived as a gestalt that exists as nothing more than, and yet

not reducible to, its elements or parts in the phenomenal field. The norm as the ‘look’ (of green on the wall, say) in *this* way can be conceived as guiding the subject—by opening up and moving subject related to multiple levels of gestalt structuration—to get what we can call not only a ‘certain’ defined look in perspective, but also, in this new phenomenal sense of the word, an ‘optimal look’. What the ‘optimal look’ *is*, in particular, undergoes a process of definition that is the very structuration of perception through embodied perspective.

To understand perceptual normativity in Merleau-Ponty’s thought in light of this passage, then, we must refer to his outlook on the original perceptual sense, based on embodied subjectivity. The ‘look’ must be of a certain type, because, as I have outlined, for Merleau-Ponty any sense can only exist as a form or structure. The look’s being situated, a form including reference to a living body integrally related to (inhabiting) its immediate surroundings, means that a certain look is meaningfully related with other certain nearby looks in what Merleau-Ponty would term a ‘schema’ (set reference in body corresponding to the available meanings for the body to take up in the world) of interrelated gestalt structures.<sup>157</sup>

This outlook on perceptual normativity can respond to some questions that come up in the debate on perceptual normativity described last chapter, and elsewhere. These questions aim at a better understanding of the experience of this original sense of perceptual normativity. Over the next two sections I discuss first the temporal stability of perceptual norms, and second the role of interests in shaping perceptual normativity.

## 5. Temporality and Stability of Norms

In making sense of this interpretation of perceptual normativity I am putting forth, how would we explain the seeming variation of stability of perceptual norms, and the fact that the

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<sup>157</sup> Carl Olson, “The Human Body as a Boundary Symbol: A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Dōgen,” *Philosophy East and West* 36, no. 2 (1986): 112.

subject is sometimes motivated (or, guided by the perceptual norm) to move to a ‘better view’, and other times not so much? That is, why would perceptual experience be more emphatically normative at some times more than others? While I don’t know where this question is explicitly raised in the literature, it is an obvious one for an account of lived perceptual normativity.

Merleau-Ponty’s thought indicates an answer to this question.

For Merleau-Ponty, such a schema of interrelated gestalt structuration in a situation can become more or less ‘sedimented’ in my body and in the world, with time. Sedimentation is the process by which a stable schema of habits, skills, and cultural acquisitions in general can be formed through the subject’s habitual practice of certain (interrelated) types of behaviour in the world: it is an “initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence” that “our open and personal existence rests on.”<sup>158</sup> This sedimented structure is on the (temporal) horizon of the present, a kind of retention of the sense of past life that bears on the present and structures the possibilities I have on a futural horizon. The subject’s sedimented skills, for instance, pattern the field of possible acts the subject can perform, and limit which bodily attitudes they can intend to take up toward their projects. Sedimentation, on my reading, would apply to norms as it applies to perceptual sense, via the temporal horizontal structure of perceptual experience—we could say that norms sediment or become entrenched in their hold on body.

In view of sedimentation, in *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty refers to certain lived forms that take on the character of an organism’s instinctive response to the sense of its environment. These are *lived a priori* or biological norms that function to structure the behaviour and perception of the organism in certain typical ways. Such a lived norm may belong

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<sup>158</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 432.

to the species as a whole and be essential for the life of the organism in an environment.<sup>159</sup> Such sedimented structures are said to function as norms to which we pre-reflectively become committed, through habitual confirmation: “when an attitude toward the world has been confirmed often enough, it becomes privileged for us.”<sup>160</sup> These may be sedimented in phenomenal body to different degrees (which Merleau-Ponty calls a “phenomenological foundation for statistical thought” of frequency), and would then appear to reflection as being more or less open to modification.<sup>161</sup> The normal subject would be said to live and perceive *according to* these norms, the norms being certain forms of situated meaning ready-available to the subject, without the need for the intervening of an intellectual act of reconstruction.<sup>162</sup>

Sedimentation allows us to understand an important limitation on, and ambiguity around, Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual normativity. We see that no perceptual norm could be defined prior to lived experience in the world, and that no such norm could be invariant in the sense of totally resistant to transformation. Perceptual norm, as a certain ‘look,’ must be thought of as contingent phenomenon despite that it is experienced as sedimented through the temporal structuration of experience.<sup>163</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s very concept of gestalt form, combined with my claim that the

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<sup>159</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 156-7. Such ‘syncretic behaviours’ are not open to learned modification, says Merleau-Ponty, distinct from a class of ‘amovable behaviours’ which are.

<sup>160</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 466.

<sup>161</sup> For instance, the subject who lives with an ‘inferiority complex’ that has sedimented into a norm of their embodied being-in-the-world can say that “after having built my life upon an inferiority complex, continuously reinforced for twenty years, it is not *likely* that I would change” (ibid., 467).

<sup>162</sup> The pathological subject whom Merleau-Ponty says has lost the ability to form motor-intentional structures, for instance, might need to perform such an intervention of mental mediation or reflective reconstruction, in order to figure out where things in his situation are relative to his body parts, or where the different parts of his body parts are in relation to each other, when instructed to perform a task. This is the case of ‘morbid motricity’ discussed in relation to the patient Schneider, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part 1, Chapters 3-6.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith), 220-222.

norm would be a gestalt form, entails a moving and dialectical forming-being-formed, and thus a necessarily limited coherence to our sense of any particular norm.

In Merleau-Ponty's writings on the expressivity of perception, there is much made of a dialectical interaction (or 'circular causality,' as I mentioned earlier) between the *a priori* sedimented forms, and *a posteriori* forms of new experience that in turn become sedimented, and which the *a priori* forms shape in virtue of their patterning the present field of perceptual possibilities. The sedimented structures carried into the present from the past are *means* of expressively, and creatively, perceiving the world anew. Paradoxically, sense can be *generated* in the present by means of being carried over from the past. Merleau-Ponty refers to this temporal unfolding of meaning where *a priori* and *a posteriori* are mutually forming as a 'coherent deformation' that cultural meanings continually undergo.<sup>164</sup> Perceptual norms, as meaningful sense relations in the world including subject, would undergo such a process of definition or modification of definition in time. Any perceptual norm, in a sense, would itself be normed over time, in that it would be shaped and re-shaped, defined and re-defined, while in reference to the perceptual unity of the certain 'look' it takes. The perceptual norm would be dynamically defined through a history of meaningful question-response between situated phenomenal body and corresponding sense-object, this internally-related and yet perceptible unity constituting the perceptual norm.

## 6. Perceptual Interests and Normativity

Another question that arises in the existing debate on perceptual normativity (brought up by Lajoie, last chapter) is this: how do we interpret the perceptual experience that sometimes it is one look, and not another, that seems to have a normative effect on us in our situation? Why is

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<sup>164</sup> Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, 241-282 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

the art-lover drawn immediately to the best view of a painting on the wall, while her child pays it no heed? While the standing-distance to an art work in a gallery clearly involves movement toward a best view, why do I not move to a best view of other objects, in the same situation? And why, if I am looking at a green wall with uneven shadowing in order to best see its colour, am I drawn to a certain best-lit patch as opposed to being drawn toward some other way of looking entirely? In general, why am I looking for what I am looking for? There is a degree of personal preference in perceptual norms' hold on us, it would seem. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this in terms of our situations being open (indeterminate): "So long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls forth privileged modes of resolution [norms] and that it, by itself, lacks the power to procure any of them."<sup>165</sup>

To further sketch an answer to these questions surrounding the uniqueness of the individual subject's relation to perceptual norms, we can consider the role that perceptual interests play in any gestalt form or 'look' the body takes up as its norm. Recall that the body's engagement in the world is directed as a project, such that the subject's interest will always be a part of the definition of the form it takes, and thus of any perceptual normativity phenomenon. Insofar as our projects are defined with reference to a subject's interests in the subject's world, interests contribute to our look taking a certain form, and not another possible type of form. Thus, I think it would become somewhat incongruous to experience to say that all possible 'looks' function *as norms* from the point of view of the subject in a situation: rather, the ones we are moved to take up do.

What I mean is that norms (as typical forms my perception is structured by) are only experienced as norms in-so-far as I have a certain situational interest in taking them up, or in

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<sup>165</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 467.

investing the ‘look’ with the power of my body, as my situation affords. Given an interest and our situation, we are led to pursue the fulfillment of that interest, the interest itself unfolding temporally. Therefore, what is experienced as a norm for one person may not be experienced as a norm for another—norms are not necessarily universalizable to all subjects, I think Merleau-Ponty would say. In principle, human subjects have differing bodies and ways of relating, none of which need be privileged over others on any permanent basis.

To better see the role of interests in perceptual norms, consider a person who has a desire to play with her pet bird. Her body tends to invest in perceptions that afford an opportunity for pursuit of playing with the pet bird—she seeks the living pet bird that can be seen, perch on her finger, and that can be heard chirping, in her situation. If her pet bird is there, the subject will pursue this more original or ‘fully afforded’ opportunity to look at a bird. If the situation is such that the living bird is not there, only then might the subject invest her look, say, ‘imaginatively’ in opportunities for pseudo-perceptions that are shallower, such as the opportunity to perceive the image of a bird in a pattern of knotted wood that suggests a mere trace of its form.<sup>166</sup> That is to say, we pursue our interests directed toward living them in the deeper or more full sense, tending to take up the more original look, given perhaps multiple ways of ‘looking bird’ offered by the situation. In this circular way, subject’s general interests will shape the way they take up a complex situation, and the opportunities afforded by the environment for taking up subject’s interest will help determine which way they take up the perception. This *certain way* of taking up interests may well be referred to as a perceptual norm (even if the form I take up is afforded disproportionately by the subject’s self-interests as opposed to what we would say is the world itself, as in the case where the subject imaginatively projects the bird look).

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<sup>166</sup> Here I am drawing on a similar example made about cats made by Romdenh-Romluc, “Image: for the eye and in mind,” 13.

Moreover, we can understand how entirely differently-looking norms compete to take up my open interest as follows. I may glance briefly at the face of a person sitting near me on the bus, but unless I am interested in getting a more full sense of their face, I will not actually be bodily drawn toward the best view of it by the lighting level or (nested) gestalt structure of that possible look. That look toward the person's face will remain on the horizon of the 'look' I actually take up, which will be invested in more powerfully, owing to a combination of perceptual interests and situational affordances for gearing into the certain sense. Other personal interests (including those of other subjects) and embodied meanings on various levels will form my perception to *the* certain type it is, the norm. Thus, the subject in this situation will likely be drawn toward looking at some other focal point (gearing into the text of a newspaper they hold, say) and adopt an appropriate bodily attitude for the immediate and broader context. In this case, *this* particular pre-reflective adjustment or 'way of looking' can be seen as having a normative dimension, in that it is the one that my look tends towards.<sup>167</sup>

Normativity will always, then, be mutually formed by the subject's projects and interests; it will also be temporal. Lajoie argued for this connection in the debate discussed last chapter, but did not present the roles of perceptual interests and temporality in normativity in terms of Merleau-Ponty's gestalt thinking and notion of original sense, as I have. The norm as look will

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<sup>167</sup> This example of how I think norms would function in a situation of competing interests might offer a good way of going back to consider the example given in the Introduction. The situation posed there was that of there being a perceptual norm that would have me adopt the look of my red scarf, as opposed to a look of my otherwise-identical orange-red scarf. If I take up the red scarf to wear, on my account it would be the original look of me wearing my red scarf that serves as a norm to guide me to 'look red.'. The norm, in this case, involves my interest in 'looking red.' The look, being open, would have the other look, red-orange, on the horizon, along with all other related meanings that are defined throughout my history with the red look. Such a norm does not, however, *determine* which way of looking I will adopt, between the red or red-orange scarves. In a way, I adopt the look of *both* scarves by wearing the red scarf, since their meanings are closely related and on each others' horizons, from my point of view. The norm guiding my wearing the red scarf relates it to the orange-red scarf, linking them as much as it determinately picks out one over the other.

be nothing more than, and yet not reducible to, any of its parts—including the part of it which is my own life project and interests.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SEEING LAMPS AND PERCEIVING THE NORM

The aim of this chapter is to respond to certain issues that were left open in the debate presented in Chapter 1, using my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's conception of perceptual normativity developed in the last chapter. On my account, perceptual norms are gestalt forms of original sense structuring embodied perspective. One major challenge made to Kelly's interpretation of how Merleau-Ponty conceives perceptual normativity was the interpretive issue raised as to whether the 'seeing things' passage authentically expresses Merleau-Ponty's view pertaining to the phenomenon of object constancy. If not, Kelly's account of normativity would lose its main base of textual support. In Section 1, I show how this 'seeing things' passage can be made sense of as representing Merleau-Ponty's view, based on my interpretation of how Merleau-Ponty conceives normativity in relation to perceptual constancy. I then address how my view of normativity differs from, and is an improvement on, Kelly's view of the perceptual norm as the 'view from everywhere', which he claims is seen in a virtual sense but not actually taken up.

In Section 2, I argue that on the basis of my interpretation, perceptual norms can be taken up virtually as possibilities of meaningful involvement, and that this is an actual, lived experience of norms. All three commentators miss this point, based on what I think is a misunderstanding of how Merleau-Ponty conceives virtuality.

This discussion on the 'seeing things' passage, extended to the disputed question of the virtuality of perceptual norms, allows my interpretation of perceptual norms to be taken in an interesting direction, which I pursue in Section 3. Here, I discuss how my interpretation of perceptual normativity could be brought into relation with Merleau-Ponty's notion of situated

human freedom. Situated freedom is the ambiguous condition by which the human subject is fundamentally oriented to a world of possibilities, only in virtue of being embedded in this world via a limited, situated perspective on it. I show how, on Merleau-Ponty's thought, the subject can be said to *freely* adopt perceptual norms, while simultaneously being in the bodily hold of the norms structuring their situation. To make this point, I show how my reading of perceptual normativity allows for a two-fold distinction, which all three commentators miss, of ways perceptual norms could be experienced by the embodied subject. I argue that norms should be conceived as ambiguous phenomena, perceptible both from the 'outside' as the focal intentional object I have a perspective on, and simultaneously as lived, from the 'inside' point of view, where the norm is a horizontal or background feature of my perceptual engagement with the world.

### 1. The 'Seeing Things' Passage

In Chapter 1, I presented the following scenario to illustrate Kelly's account of how perceptual norms operate in the perception of the (constantly) green colour of an unevenly-lit, living-room wall. Looking at the wall with an interest in seeing the colour of the wall, the subject experiences that the lighting, shadows, and other contextual features of the situation 'guide' them, in a direct, bodily-intentional way, to best see the green of the wall. Kelly's claim is that this very directing of the gaze by the contextual *background* is a *normative* dimension of perception.<sup>168</sup> Kelly identifies the norm with the optimal viewing context from which the property or object in question is *best* revealed. In this case of the phenomenon of property constancy, the body can actually take the optimal viewing context up, and get the best view.

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<sup>168</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things."

On Kelly's account of the case of perception of constant objects, however, it is *not* possible for body-subject to actually get the optimal view. The norm in this case is present to perception only virtually, as a 'view from everywhere' on the object. The norm, in both of these cases, is said to be perceived indeterminately as a horizontal or background part of perceptual structure. I will now be able to reflect on these claims of Kelly's using my own interpretation, and then revisit the challenges Kelly's account faced from Lajoie and Matherne.

The first problem I see with Kelly's approach, as a whole, is that it attempts to use Merleau-Ponty's thought to address the problem of perceptual constancy whilst posing this problem in the kind of way that Merleau-Ponty is critical of. As I outlined in Chapter 1, Kelly argues based on a distinction made between the 'way' a property looks, and what it looks 'to be'; he distinguishes between appearances and reality, which is the very presupposed distinction Merleau-Ponty took issue with in the section of *Phenomenology of Perception* addressed to the traditional problem of perceptual constancy.<sup>169</sup> Kelly makes this distinction while addressing the problem of perceptual constancy, which he poses, in the traditional way, as a problem in which contextual variation is at odds with perceptual constancy of properties and objects. He uses this distinction, and the claim that we perceive *both* the property as it 'is', and as it 'looks', to challenge empiricist and cognitivist solutions to the problem of perceptual constancy.<sup>170</sup>

But as I showed in the last chapter, from the outset of dealing with the problem of perceptual constancy, Merleau-Ponty is claiming that such an approach to 'reality' as distinct from or behind 'appearance' can itself be a way of implicitly treating perception as operating on a ready-made determinate world of objects. As I outlined last chapter, Merleau-Ponty instead

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<sup>169</sup> That is, Chapter 3 of Part II.

<sup>170</sup> Here I refer to the earlier paper, "What Do We See?".

shows the need to ask the question of *how* sense is determined. This led him to the original definition of sense that is the original sense or ‘look’ of embodied perspective, which I argued functions as a dynamic perceptual norm. We do not see *both* real properties and ways those properties look; we see original sense in a process of perspectival definition. Kelly’s account includes none of this Merleau-Pontyan background, in dealing with the problem of perceptual constancy.

Without an account that involves Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of perceptual gestalts—that is, of existence structured on original perceptual unities that form the perceptual engagement of embodied subject with the world, prior to the objective world of property, object, determinate relation—Kelly’s approach to perceptual constancy is at risk of missing the pre-objective openness and phenomenality of perceptual relations that I have tried to emphasize in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. This overlooking of phenomenal body and its role in perception would, I think, naturally lead to problems understanding the lived norms that guide perception.<sup>171</sup> Such a problem does arise, I think, when Kelly’s account misuses the notion of ‘virtuality.’

In order to examine what *virtual sense* means for Merleau-Ponty, I would like to look at the ‘seeing things’ passage, which is where the term came up in the debate. I will quote this passage again, at length. Kelly uses the passage as support for his view that the norm involved in the experience of object constancy is the ‘view from everywhere.’

To see is to enter into a universe of beings that show themselves, and they could not show themselves if they could not also be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words, to see an object is to come to inhabit it and to thereby grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn towards this object. And yet, to the extent that I also see those things,

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<sup>171</sup> For instance, Kelly defines a norm based using terms such as ‘optimum’ and ‘maximum’, or an object ‘revealing more of itself’, as if operating on already objectively comparable, better or worse views of the object. At the same time, he insists throughout that the norm is indeterminately perceived. Here I think there is a confusion in that Kelly assumes a common use of certain terms (optimal, maximum) which Merleau-Ponty is adopting in a novel way. Kelly doesn’t specify his use of these terms in any other way, which makes his account difficult to make sense of.

they remain places open to my gaze and, *being virtually situated in them*, I already perceive the central object of my present vision from different angles. Each object, then, is a mirror to all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can “see.” The back of my lamp is merely the face that it “shows” to the fireplace. Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. Each act of seeing that I perform is instantly reiterated among all the objects of the world that are grasped as coexistent because each object just is all that the others ‘see’ of it. Thus, our formula above must be modified: the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house *seen from everywhere*. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden.<sup>172</sup>

Like Lajoie and Matherne, I agree that this passage is indeed a moment in Merleau-Ponty’s characteristic style of writing where he is leaning toward the intellectualist view, in order to correct what he just previously presented as being the empiricist brand of objectivist thinking. The empiricist position, before this passage, refutes itself in leading us to a ‘view from nowhere’, or a subject-less view of the objective world. However, unlike Matherne and Lajoie and more like Kelly, I do not think Merleau-Ponty means to fully refute what this particular passage suggests.<sup>173</sup>

On my account presented thus far, it is essential to embodied perception that “to see an object is to come to inhabit it,” since perception is a lived, bodily relation. Merleau-Ponty thinks that the characteristic human subject’s way of orienting to objects of the world is perspectival: objects of sense appear with a horizon of related meanings and as offering *a possibility among others* for motor-intentional taking up. The human subject orients to objects in this way, with an attitude of ‘I can.’ To adopt a perspective on a sense, or a ‘look’ is simultaneously is to be open to (other) possible perspectives on the same look.

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<sup>172</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 70–71. Emphasis mine, here.

<sup>173</sup> Granted, I take Merleau-Ponty’s writing style to be fundamentally ambiguous and open to interpretive debate of this kind, especially at this particular passage.

The ‘look,’ as I have discussed, is formed by the meanings on its horizons, in a structure of nested gestalts which phenomenal body is a meaningful (and integral) part of, insofar as body adopts the look. That I “already perceive the central object from many angles,” that I “grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn towards this object,” or that “when I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can ‘see’” can be read as in line with this gestalt conceptual understanding of how meaning is directed onto the sense of the focal object by its horizons.

If we read the ‘seeing things’ passage as depicting embodied perspectival structure, rather than as depicting a subject positing an atemporal system of relations in a poly-thetic act (as Matherne and Lajoie read the passage), then I think this passage would be largely consistent with the views belonging to Merleau-Ponty, on one condition. What is essential, I think, is that the body-subject is included as one such side of the room that sees the things. It is this inclusion of subject as a body open to the seeing things—as *part* of any inter-sensory system or structure I perceive—that the intellectualist voice here would purposely omit, I think. The intellectualist would not include subject’s phenomenal body in the system of things, I think, since they would not take perceptual subject to be inhabiting a body, or to be inhabiting the room. In other words, for this passage to be taken as reconcilable with Merleau-Ponty’s view, we must be sure to include the meaning bestowed on the lamp insofar as it is meaningfully related to the body-subject perceiving it. Thus, if the ‘view from everywhere’ is taken as the horizon of sense that includes the body-subject’s lived relation to lamp, I can side with Kelly that this passage is authentic to Merleau-Ponty’s view.

In this way, with a view to embodied perception structured on original sense, we are in a better position to agree with Kelly's claim that there is an implicit perceptual normativity operating in the scene depicted by the passage. The normativity allowing for perception of the object, on my account, would be based on the object-horizonal structure of the perspective on the lamp, which functions as a perceptual norm in defining the original sense of its focal object.

## 2. The Question of Virtuality, and Freedom

Kelly equates this 'view from everywhere' with a norm that the subject cannot actually take up, arguing abstractly that it merely "represents the context that would give us a 'maximum grip' on the object" (if we could have it, which we cannot).<sup>174</sup> Also rather rigidly, we have seen that Kelly identifies the norm with the 'background' of the figure-ground structure of perception. However, Kelly does not specifically identify his notion of norm with the original phenomenal sense formed as a 'look', which is the unity formed by bodily attitude corresponding to opportunity afforded by world. This insistence that norms be conceived merely as background features renders Kelly's reading of perceptual normativity difficult to understand within Merleau-Ponty's wider thought or the gestalt ontological views he held at the time of writing *Phenomenology of Perception*.

I would now like to address the question that featured in the debate of whether the horizonal 'view from everywhere' on the object can be actually taken up by the embodied subject. Kelly's reason for thinking that subject cannot actually take up the 'view from everywhere' is that subject cannot *actually* inhabit all the viewpoints in the room simultaneously, being a situated perceiver with a necessarily limited perspective.<sup>175</sup> The 'view from everywhere' is present to perception *only* 'virtually', by which Kelly means potentially, but not actually. The

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<sup>174</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things," 95.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 91.

‘view from everywhere’ is an out-of-reach ideal to which our actual body tends toward, while moving around different locations in the room.

Similarly to my issue with Kelly’s way of distinguishing a property as it *is* from the property as it *looks*, I think this categorical distinction of actual from virtual is invalid, in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. And here, on the question of virtuality, is where Kelly’s overall approach runs him into error and claims that are irreconcilable with Merleau-Ponty’s outlook, I think.<sup>176</sup> The problem, as I see it, is that Kelly is still thinking of the room of the ‘seeing things’ passage in terms of objective spatial relations. Of course, *objective* body, my physical flesh and bones, cannot be said to occupy every point in objective space in the room simultaneously: if my objective body is located at point A in objective space, then it is unambiguously *not* actually located at point B, across the room. But in the ‘seeing things’ passage we are dealing with the room as a *lived* space, which phenomenal body projects in the field as possibilities for meaningful involvement. Merleau-Ponty denies that lived space is a “mere summation of juxtaposed points” or “an infinity of relations synthesized by my consciousness in which my body would be implicated.”<sup>177</sup> In the lived experience of space and time, “I am not in space and in time, nor do I think space and time; rather, I am of space and of time [belong to space and time]; my body fits into them and embraces them.”<sup>178</sup> As I argued, reading this passage as authentically Merleau-Ponty’s view is conditional on taking body-subject

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<sup>176</sup> Incidentally, that the ‘view from everywhere’ of the object referred to in the seeing things passage is a *norm* is nowhere stated explicitly by Merleau-Ponty, meaning Kelly has no textual support for his specific claim. At “Seeing Things,” 95, Kelly admits the significant interpretive liberty he is taking in his reading: he says that he believes the seeing things passage refers to a *norm*, but that this is an extrapolation of what Merleau-Ponty’s understanding would be, at Merleau-Ponty’s best (and that the norm is the view from everywhere present in the phenomenon of object constancy contradicts what Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere, even).

<sup>177</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 141. Even in the commonplace sense of the words, there is a difference in meaning between ‘living’ in a room (the whole room), and ‘being located’ in a room (at just one point)—it is meaningful to say I actually live at all parts of the room at the same time, as I am arguing phenomenal body does.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. Alternative translation suggested by Landes.

to be included in the scene itself, inhabiting the room. The logic of objective space does not apply in the case of lived space, since at any point in time, I am meaningfully involved with the whole of the space in various ways. This original experience of space, which subject has in virtue of motor experience of body, “offers us a manner of reaching the world and the object.”<sup>179</sup> Thus I think it is a mistake to read Merleau-Ponty as meaning that the subject is not *actually* taking up and inhabiting the objects in the room, due to a separation in objective space. Sense organs can hardly be conceived without the notion of bodily involvement with the world at-a-distance. To say that subject cannot actually reach the objects in the world due to the limitation of embodiment is to be thinking in terms of non-living object-body.

Secondly, I think Kelly and the other commentators get the sense in which Merleau-Ponty uses the term ‘virtual’ wrong, and that this might further have led Kelly to conclude that the virtual ‘view from everywhere’ is inaccessible to the subject. In the *Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty defines an order of complexity of gestalt structuration of embodied consciousness that he takes to define the characteristically human way of being in the world, and calls it the human order or ‘mind.’<sup>180</sup> Such a *human* organism is able to perceive their environment as a field of meanings whose parts, particular gestalt forms nested in the field, can be individually geared into. The human perceives these meanings as *solicitations* that *motivate* possibilities of meaningful action in the field. This allows the human organism to enjoy qualitatively different kinds of behaviour than their non-human animal counterparts: the human subject is open to creative ways of being involved with objects of the cultural world, including language (Merleau-

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> This sense of humanity is not assuming any traditional metaphysical notions of human being or freedom. Rather, the term picks out a class of structures of behaviour which at the time of study, do not seem to have been observed in even the most intelligent non-human animals. Cf. *Structure of Behaviour*, 175-6. This order of structuration is dependent on, and ontologically continuous with, lower orders of gestalt structuration he calls ‘life’ and ‘matter,’ and is said to be dialectically related to these. (Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty.”)

Ponty calls these behaviours ‘symbolic’).<sup>181</sup> This notion of intentionality at the level of ‘mind’ is no different from the notion of intentionality I have been describing throughout this thesis, by which subject is directed at objects of the human world in the object-horizon structure of embodied perspective. Such objects of ‘mind’, let it be clear, are not reducible to intellectual relations of mind classically conceived, but are the intentional unities of original sense, or ‘looking’, which I distinguished from traditional conceptions of the object or signification in the last chapter. Since Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual objects are embodied unities of sense that are geared into by phenomenal body through motor intentionality, we can say that these meanings are *actually* taken up by phenomenal body. On the order Merleau-Ponty calls ‘mind’, of course, human subject is intending the cultural world through (situated) body.

Merleau-Ponty calls this orientation definitive of the human subject toward intentional objects as possibilities in the field a *virtual* orientation.<sup>182</sup> Virtuality and actually, here, are not opposed as in traditional thought; the virtual sense is actually lived (by phenomenal body), and the actually existing meanings of phenomenal field are lived as virtual (as possibilities among others). To introduce another earlier term of Merleau-Ponty’s: the perceptual engagement of this mental order of behaviour is qualified as ‘free’ or ‘chosen’, since involvement with perspectival objects of sense is always open to possibilities, and never determined to a single or fixed meaning.<sup>183</sup> The human organism, on Merleau-Ponty’s account, is uniquely free on this account.

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<sup>181</sup> Non-human organisms, by contrast, are gestalt-structured up to the order of ‘life’, such as to only be capable of responding immediately to the sense of the environment as a whole. The gestalt sense of the environment (as opposed to the material *content* of the situation, on this gestalt structural account of behaviour) *impels* (rather than motivates) a singular form of meaningful bodily response in these organisms.

<sup>182</sup> The reference for my understanding of this use of the word ‘virtual’ as being definitive of the human order of behaviour is Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, 175-6. Merleau-Ponty also discusses “virtual” body as oriented to a field of possible actions, which projects a phenomenal spatiality, at *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260. The overall account of this area of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in the *Structure of Behaviour* was helped by the overview by Toadvine, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty.”

<sup>183</sup> With regards to freedom, Merleau-Ponty says, “This power of choosing and varying points of view permits man to create instruments, not under the pressure of a *de facto* situation, but for a virtual use and especially in

The scientific view of world as causally determined by the laws of science is a valid view to adopt, but it would not be a possible *perspective* without this originally ‘free’ orientation to the world, through phenomenal body’s lived openness to multiplicities of sense.

Cultural objects and tools, such as lamps or chairs, are taken up with reference to their shared practical meanings for subjects, which are ‘looks’ of the thing that the body-subject adopts, gearing into the object in practical, everyday use. The cultural object is perceived as having not just a singular definitive meaning, but rather many possible meanings for the subject, which are perceived indeterminately on the horizon of a certain practical or tool ‘look’ the object might have that is in perspective.

To clarify this notion of embodied freedom as meant in *The Structure of Behaviour*, consider how when I perceptually engage a chair, I do so ‘freely’—in other words, I perceive the chair, ambiguously, as a possibility for a form of bodily involvement among others. The possibilities are limited by the situation and my personal history, which are the sedimented forms retained from the past that lay out the present moment. The chair’s practical meaning as chair is one of its possible ‘looks’ that I can perceive it by, and other ‘looks’ recede to the background of the perceptual structure, without ever disappearing, when I use it in this sense. To see this, consider a situation where I am about to give up my chair for sale. The practical ‘look’ of the chair (as offering an opportunity for my body to adopt a corresponding sitting attitude) may recede to the background, and I may perceive the chair primarily in a sense of personal or emotional valuing, my body sentimentally recalling the original look of my proud parent as they gave it to me. The chair’s economic value, which is more abstractable from the immediate

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order to fabricate others... These acts of the human dialectic all reveal the same essence: the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate, and not in relation to the limited milieu.” (*Structure of Behaviour*, 175-6).

situation and which is reflected in the price the chair is selling for (a good price I can get for it, say), is also nearby on the background, in the phenomenal field. This meaning will soon figure, and normatively so, as it draws me away from the look of personal significance of the chair, to solicit me to let go of the chair in exchange for an appealing sum of cash.

I think that we must read this same sense of virtuality when Merleau-Ponty writes of virtually inhabiting the ‘seeing things’ with a look. That is, when the seeing things refer me to other perspectives I could adopt around the room, I inhabit them virtually (as Merleau-Ponty states), as possibilities among others. In this way, the object-horizon structure opens onto such a multi-faceted and unified exploration of the object in the room, as well as to more abstract investments of meaning on the horizon (that is, meanings that refer further beyond the immediate situation of the room) such as economic values, say.<sup>184</sup>

Thus, by default of being an object perceived *as* such an intentional object (of the human cultural world), that is by a *human* subject, it would be correct to say that the body-subject takes a virtual orientation to the object perceived. This does not at all disagree with the fact that the subject is embodied and situated with the object in front of her—which is the conclusion Matherne and Lajoie draw, in disagreement with Kelly. I think all three commentators misunderstand this matter of human orientation toward objects in the world as being virtual yet bodily taken-up, in the phenomenal field. This leads to a sore misreading and a certain incoherence to their claims about normativity, in my opinion. I think this demonstrates a tendency of contemporary readers to treat Merleau-Ponty’s notions in an objective fashion

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<sup>184</sup> The possibilities for moving around the object, or inhabiting the seeing things, would appear structured differently according to which original sense I am investing in the chair currently. The definition of sense unfolds differently according to whether I perceive the practical value, or the personal value, say.

despite claiming to do otherwise.<sup>185</sup> This misunderstanding would be a problem if these commentators are aiming to use Merleau-Ponty as a touchstone for their own work on embodied subjectivity and perceptual norms.

However, Kelly is not just saying that the *objects in the room* are perceived virtually (which is what the ‘seeing things’ passage does say, fairly clearly, and yet which is part of the reason why Lajoie and Matherne reject its authenticity to Merleau-Ponty’s own view). Beyond this, Kelly is claiming that the *norm* is perceived virtually, in the case of object constancy (and furthermore, that the norm is *not* perceived virtually in the case of property constancy). Referring this claim back to my interpretation of normativity creates an interesting situation, in light of the understanding of virtuality just put forth. I will briefly sketch how I think this opens an area that could be further studied, as a potential way of bringing Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perceptual normativity (as I have understood it) in line with his wider conception of existential freedom as situated.

### 3. Perceiving Norms: A Two-Fold or Ambiguous View

I would like to briefly examine how, depending on the bodily relation of subject with perceptual norm, the human subject can be said to perceive a given norm in two distinguishable ways which together dynamically structure experience normatively: one as oriented to the norm virtually, and the other, as oriented to the norm not virtually but in a more immediate bodily sense. Or, as a corresponding way I propose to make this distinction of how we experience perceptual norms, embodied subject can perceive the norm ‘from the outside’ on the level of

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<sup>185</sup> But the particular mistake that I am point out here is understandable, given that virtuality is discussed in the *Structure of Behaviour*, which seems to be commonly left to the side in the Merleau-Ponty commentary concerning *Phenomenology of Perception*. This may be valid since the work represents earlier, pre-phenomenological views of Merleau-Ponty’s. That said, my taking these earlier ideas up at this point is intended to suggest an interesting question to be pursued, more than advancing any fully worked-out interpretive claim.

gestalt structuration of mind, as well as ‘from the inside,’ as I will explain. I see this distinction working as follows, based on my reading of perceptual normativity presented in the last chapter.

The norm itself, as my account has already shown, would be perceived *virtually* on the following condition: that the subject orients towards the norm *as* a certain ‘look.’ The blue of the paint on the painter’s tray, say, would be perceived virtually when subject takes a perspective on it, adopting blue as a look.

I can view the norm this way, and be said by Merleau-Ponty to *freely* take it up, in mind. As described earlier, I would *actually* be taking up the virtually-perceived norm via phenomenal body, as Kelly and the other commentators would deny. On my interpretation, since the norm is the original look I am bodily adopting, the norm is open to my embodied perception in the situation, in precisely the same way I just described for the ‘look’ of any embodied sense in the human world of cultural objects. Thus, I perceive the norm itself, appearing before me in the human world, when I adopt a perspective on it. I ‘choose’ the norm, and its hold on my body (or, my body’s hold on the norm) is seen as a possibility among others.

Since the norm I have a perspective on figures as focal object when I orient to it in this virtual sense, I think Merleau-Ponty would think of this way of perception of the norm as being an ‘outside’, yet not disengaged, view on the norm. The norm, when we adopt a perspective on it, is seen at a phenomenal distance that paradoxically gives me access to it, as a perceptual object able to appear with definition on my field of vision. Here, I perceive the norm as a phenomenon external to me, while related to me, with its own definition in the world through the structuration of perspective.

To give a wider understanding of this experience of normativity ‘from the outside’, recall the normative role that certain highly sedimented biological forms—the species *a priori*

mentioned last chapter—play in an organism’s life, relative to its vital needs. Such norms are immediately lived and structure the organism’s behaviour in relation to its environment. The norms can, of course, be recognized ‘from the outside’ by the human subject involved in observing the organism’s life, should the human subject adopt a perspective on the behaviour. Merleau-Ponty understands the definitive ‘look’ of an organism’s normal or definitive species behaviour as being recognized and focal during, for example, the lived activity of scientific (zoological) study, where we adopt such an ‘outside’ view on the norm.<sup>186</sup>

The ‘outside’ view I am referring to here refers neither to a mind-independent object, nor to an object constituted by subject’s mental acts; rather the subject is geared into the particular meaning of the field outside it, as a related part. To see this aspect of embodied subjectivity, take the ‘lamp’ as a perceptual norm, viewed from the ‘outside’, for instance. The lamp, when I adopt a perspective on it, is seen as a possibility among others for meaningful involvement. It shows up on a field such that I can shift my view to some other thing in the room, which previously was on the horizon—the green colour of the wall, say. Looking at the wall to see its colour, I am no longer adopting a perspective on the lamp. However, the lamp’s sense is still present to my perception (the lamp does not disappear from the light level); the lamp is now on the horizon of meaning of my current perspective on the green of the wall. (Likely, as discussed last chapter, the lamp anchors the lighting level of the room in this role, ‘hiding’ from conscious awareness and appearing as neutral, as a condition of my ability to see what else I am now looking at in the room.) The way my body and the lamp are related has changed, when my perspective shifts away

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<sup>186</sup> This is the orientation Merleau-Ponty has in mind toward behaviour, viewed externally, in the *Structure of Behaviour*. In this earlier work, he has not yet adopted the first-person phenomenological stance of interrogation of phenomena in a phenomenal field that he takes up in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Also, notice that there is a philosophically interesting question that arises here about the relation of what we call ‘normal’ and ‘normative’ here. This is taken up and discussed in Marco Spina, “Norm and Normality, Starting from Merleau-Ponty,” *Phenomenology and Mind* 3 (2012): 36-46.

from it. And since the body-subject is no longer perceiving the lamp virtually, as the perspectival object or from the ‘outside view’, I would say experience of normativity in relation to the lamp is shifted to one that is now lived ‘from the inside.’ From this ‘inside’ view on the norm, by which I mean the view from which lamp’s meaning takes a horizontal role, by which it can provide a source of light that we are not presently adopting a perspective on, the lamp now serves (inseparably from other contextual features in the room) to provide an experience of normativity in my present project of finding the best view of the colour of the wall. In this way, we see that norms are shaping the perceptual experience from two sides: on the horizon (‘inside’) and as perceptual object (‘outside’), in the definition of original sense that is perspective and which we experience as normative.

Such a norm like the lamp, experienced ‘from the inside’ or on the horizon, need not be seen only virtually, as a possibility, on Merleau-Ponty’s account. The lived perceptual norm experienced ‘from the inside’ would be perceived as a background bodily sense of a certain powerful hold of one’s own body on the world, and world on one’s body, seemingly guiding my life in a way I do not have any conscious say in. When we live perceptual norms ‘from the inside’, I think, we experience that we are not quite a completely free agent who makes only voluntary movements in the world. Such a normative pull, as a stable structure guiding my movement in the project I am involved with, would be properly placed in the ‘background’ of the figure-ground structure of perception. This ‘from the inside’ sense of perceptual norms, I think, corresponds to the indeterminate “tension which oscillates around a norm”<sup>187</sup> which Kelly seems to highlight in his account of perceptual normativity. The lamp as norm lived ‘from the inside’, I would say, is the way in which gestalt-formed unities of original sense can serve as these hidden

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<sup>187</sup> *Phenomenology of Perception*, 316.

norms that “lead” the gaze to the best-lit patch on the green wall.<sup>188</sup> This ‘inside view’ is the normativity appearing not *just* due to the lamp alone but due to the whole of my situation or perceptual *level*, as it guides my body. This would underlie the free task of definition of sense via perspective.

Unlike the virtual perception of norm as object ‘from the outside,’ wherein we experience ourselves as freely involved with the norm, the sense of normativity ‘from the inside,’ I think, would best fit with Kelly’s interpretation of perceptual norms as being experienced indeterminately and holistically, just outside of my awareness. Unlike Kelly, I would not make a rigid division between figure and ground as being non-normative and normative in function, respectively. This conception of normativity in strict association with the background became confusing and difficult to make sense of, particularly when Kelly seemed to end up identifying the constant object and property, which we adopt a perspective on and which is *not* a background feature of perception, as the norm. Instead of this, I see *both* ways of perceiving norms as working in tandem (that is, their effects would not necessarily be experienced as clearly distinguishable) through gestalt structural interaction to define the original ‘look’ through perspective. This seems to me to be a way to make sense of how Merleau-Ponty indicates that there is an inner and outer contribution to the experience of normativity: “Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point, which is obtained by an equilibrium between the interior and exterior horizons.”<sup>189</sup> We could

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<sup>188</sup> Here, we could additionally say, my phenomenal body takes up the lamp from the inside, as the lamp itself is on the horizon (providing the lighting that plays a background role in defining the related senses in question). This is possible, notice, since subject is embodied, that is on the level of the lamp’s lighting and lamp itself.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

interpret these interior and exterior horizons to be referring to the inside and outside views that we simultaneously experience of perceptual norms, in the experience of perceptual constancy.

What is notable here is that it is *embodied* subject, situated freely at the level of original sense through body, that is capable of such a two-fold view. Body-subject is more than pure mind, and so is not limited to an ideal way of orienting to things of the world. Because we are bodies, not all that we perceive is perceived ‘freely,’ as a possibility of engagement among others—sometimes we experience vital necessity. (If subject were a purely free and disembodied consciousness in a transcendental field of virtual meaning, what would make subject shift from one object to another, or need to move their organs of sense at all?) In the experience of body-subject, there is a more original background even to our humanity. Body is more than mere mind, since for Merleau-Ponty mind is just an higher-order level of gestalt structuration dependent on the integration of lower and more primitive orders of bodily structure. Beneath mind, body provides subject this more deeply internal access to the perceptual world of meaning: this ‘inside view’ that is behind (and necessary for) every ‘outside view.’ Moreover, we can consider the ‘lower-level’ gestalt structures on which mind depend as opening onto the meaning of our pre-human life. We can adopt a lived point of view on the structures that refer to our species-historical origins as organisms embedded in the world no differently from non-human animals.

Let us consider further this ‘inside view’ in the case of human organism, whose phenomenal body includes mind such that their characteristic way of being in the world is perspectival. Here, on the account I have proposed, the organism’s ‘inside view’ can shift to an ‘outside view’ of the same norm, and back again. Take the bodily norm of breathing (which we would not usually take to be a mental activity). When I breathe, most of the time I live the breath

‘from the inside’ and do not orient to the activity of breathing in the virtual sense. To do so would mean to shift to adopting a perspective on my own breathing, or to view breathing as a possibility among others, for my life. My body living the norm of breathing is the same body-subject who is simultaneously open to the cultural world, and who can appear before it. Such a subject can take a perspective on *other* breathing bodies (as the doctor may), as well as their own. Most of the time, however, breathing is not the focus of mind, since subject is engaged with other kinds of cultural meanings in the world, instead. Nonetheless, subject is geared into the environment through breathing as a necessary *biological* condition of experience. Furthermore, if something goes wrong with my body-function of breathing (if I have an asthma flare-up, say), my certain way of breathing becomes something that appears on the phenomenal field as soliciting myself or a doctor to take a better look at it, or in other words to adopt a particular perspective on it. If this change in breathing-style doesn’t end my life—if I am able to recover—my way of breathing will likely shift to the background again, where it will normatively condition my other experiences in the world ‘from the inside.’

#### 4. Conclusion

I will conclude this chapter by summarizing how my interpretation pertaining to the virtuality of norms fits in with the debate presented earlier. A virtual norm, Kelly claims, can be perceived as a tension that refers to that norm, its presence constant and indeterminate, and drawing us to move to see a focal object better. Lajoie and Matherne both agreed with Kelly that the optimal view would be uninhabitable in actuality by the body, and yet they criticize Kelly for presenting this view as Merleau-Ponty’s, on the thought that such a norm would be foreign to the very notion of embodied perception and perspectivity. I disagree with all three commentators on the question of the uninhabitability of such a virtual norm, given that (a) I understand Merleau-

Ponty to think of the *virtual* orientation to a sense as no different from a perspective on that sense, and that (b) on my interpretation, Merleau-Ponty conceives of perceptual norm as a certain type of gestalt structuration that is a ‘look,’ and thus way of bodily *inhabiting* a situation via the structure of perspective.

I have presented how I think such a look can be oriented to from the inside (non-virtually, but more immediately) and from the outside (virtually, or freely), by embodied subject. Perceptual norms, then, can be understood as being experienced in an ambiguous sense, across multiple levels of gestalt structuration. In any perspective on the world, norms function to guide our sense both on the horizon (the ‘inside view’) and as focal object our perspective is on (the ‘outside view’).<sup>190</sup> A norm can shift between these kinds of roles when our perspective shifts. Kelly seems to be attempting to ascribe perceptual normativity a strictly ‘background’ role in perception, which I think is helpful for describing only one side of normativity: the lived, ‘inside’ view of norms which (contrary to what he himself claims) would be conceived as a non-virtual way of orienting to the perceptual norms.

This ambiguous two-sidedness of perceptual norms should be taken into account when we attempt to make sense of passages such as the ‘seeing things’ passage in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. The passage presents a perspective on a focal object, a lamp, defined in relation with other objects on the horizon, in a room inhabited by a subject. We can think of this passage keeping in mind that the lamp could just as well appear on the horizon, if the subject’s view shifted. Then, the lamp could be a norm experienced by the subject from the

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<sup>190</sup> I describe these two ways of seeing norms as distinguishable, but I think that in experience they would work together, further ambiguously, given that ‘looks’ on the horizon are meaningfully related to the focal ‘look’.

inside, as the 'lighting level' providing a background bodily pull that guides subject to better see another focal object (from the outside).

My account of there being an ambiguity in the way we perceive norms, suggesting a situated freedom in subject's relation to norms, is not explicitly stated in any writings that I know of by Merleau-Ponty (or anyone else). I suppose that this is because the question of normativity was only on the horizons of his thought in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Since Merleau-Ponty thinks of embodied subjectivity itself as inherently ambiguous and two-sided, my account may offer a potential way to better conceptualize perceptual normativity in the context of Merleau-Ponty's thought, beyond the restrictions of Kelly's account. This ambiguous two-sidedness of perceptual normativity, I find, is reflective of Merleau-Ponty's core claim that embodied subject is open to the world and *in* this same meaningful world. I think Merleau-Ponty's philosophy uniquely provides a view of perception in which subject, as body, is on the level of things. Lamp could not serve the subject to get a better view of what they are looking at, from either the 'inner' or 'outer' view, were it not on the level of body-subject living in the room with that lamp.

## CONCLUSION

By its openness to the world and gestalt-structural embeddedness in the world, phenomenal body is involved—both passively and actively, freely and non-freely—in a multi-level formation of the sense of the world. For instance, the lighting level in a room as a whole confers meaning on each of the coloured parts, and so do the subject's immediate interests and personal history. This meaningful structuring allows for a perceptual subject's home life, in which she can project meaningfully around the living-room. In such a setting, if the subject were to 'look' with the goal of seeing a particular colour, such as the green paint on the wall, she can move pre-reflectively through the room to a *better* view of the green, relative to her current perspective. In this thesis, I have examined Merleau-Ponty's conception of *how* the embodied subject can have such an experience of perceptual normativity, wherein their view on sense tends toward an 'optimum'. On my account, it is the original sense, which is conceived as basic gestalt perceptual unity, that serves as norm in this direct, bodily guiding of the subject toward optimal sense. The object-horizon structure of perspective is how sense becomes originally defined. That for Merleau-Ponty this definition is conceived as an open yet structured *process* is how, I think, his philosophy of perception offers a unique opportunity to understand the experience of perceptual normativity.

Perception traditionally conceived, on empiricist or intellectualist assumptions, views perception as a later stage of organization of initially meaningless atoms of a 'given' sensation, guided either by mind-independent causal laws or else by the *a priori* laws of rational mind. Such standpoints cannot offer us an account of ordinary, pre-reflective perceptual engagement in the world as normative on its own right. I would say that in such classical theories of perception, where subject's embodiment is not appreciated, the subject is blind to the lamp as lived norm. On

such a kind of view, the role of the lighting would be conceived as something variable that *interferes* with the clear perception of real things in the room, rather than as something that guides perception and co-inhabits space with phenomenal body.

This thesis developed an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual normativity based on reading a passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty remarks on how perception tends toward an optimal view of things, suggesting a normative dimension. This difficult passage was made sense of in light of Merleau-Ponty's wider thought at the time of its writing, and specifically his conception of the intentional object as embodied, original sense or 'look' that is intended through the object-horizon structuration of perspective. I presented this interpretation in Chapter 2. Also in Chapter 2, I took up this understanding of Merleau-Ponty's notion of norms to get at questions Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly address, concerning perceptual normativity: how perceptual norms are temporal and contingent in their hold on body, and how perceptual norms integrate the subject's interests. I continued, in Chapter 3, to explore how this notion of perceptual normativity can be understood in terms of a two-fold distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' orientations to perceptual norms, which together dynamically shape perceptual experience normatively.

My interpretation was presented against the backdrop of a debate in the literature by contemporary phenomenologists about how to interpret perceptual normativity in Merleau-Ponty's thought. I introduced, and then returned to respond to this debate explicitly, in Chapters 1 and 3, respectively. I think my interpretation is an improvement on the views offered there in that it clarifies how norms are related to Merleau-Ponty's view of the structure of experience, which I view as basing an original, pre-objective experience of normativity that would be a lived condition of experience. Without such a conception, Kelly's account of perceptual normativity

offered a rigid and one-sided view of norms, and led him to claims that are in contradiction with Merleau-Ponty's basic outlook on embodied subjectivity as open to taking up virtual meaning.

To summarize my main interpretive claims which were put forth in Chapter 2. I have examined how Merleau-Ponty's remarks on normativity can be understood as related to core parts of his thought on embodied subjectivity, as well as his gestalt ontological view of perception as structured according to perceptual unities of original sense. The original sense or 'look' necessarily transcends any part of the world (including the subject's body) because it appears with a horizon of indeterminacy, which opens it to a world of varying perspectives and variations of the sense. Perceptual norms, on my interpretation, are understood as based on these original, embodied senses, which unfold temporally through the perspectival structure of phenomenal definition.

The norm, as involved in such an original definition of sense, would be adoptable by a plurality of differently-appearing body subjects. It would be translatable to various mediums insofar as it is communicable and can be taken up meaningfully by those particular bodies. The perceptual norm can be seen by the subject from all sides—insofar as subject is an open body that is moving in nested gestalt forms and levels of meaning. Asking *how* we perceive or take up the norm reveals that the norm can be experienced in a two-fold or ambiguous sense, from inside and outside. The perceptual norm is fundamentally internal to perception and structures its unfolding, from the inside. We can also orient ourselves to perceive the norm from the outside, taking the norm itself as a possibility for bodily engagement among others in the phenomenal field. The norm can, in this two-fold sense, be seen as appearing both on the foreground and background of our everyday involvement with the world.

For instance, I could perceive my friend delivering a speech (which unfolds according to a perceptual norm), and orient myself toward the speech as a distinct possibility of speaking style (or, a certain form of speaking among other possibilities) that appears to me with a horizon of related possible meaning. I perceive myself, too, as able to bodily adopt the style of speech.

This scenario points to a further interesting implication of my interpretation that could be taken up in further study. Implied from my claim that we can adopt a *virtual* or free orientation to perceptual norms, I think, is the subject's freedom to *resist* a norm perceived in their situation. I can resist a sedimented structure that guides my life 'from the inside' once I adopt a perspective on it, as a possibility for bodily involvement among others, perceptible in relation to my interests. I am not *necessarily* drawn against my will, for instance, to adopt my friend's speaking style 'from the inside,' if I recognize it as a possibility among others that I am in relation to *as* a norm; I can be said to resist the perceptual norm of her speaking style, if I adopt a perspective on it. Attempting to close off my ears to her speech will not allow such a resistance.

Also suggested here is the subject's ability to freely and creatively determine *new* perceptual norms, so long as they are livable, from the inside, by that situated body.<sup>191</sup> This notion of perception unfolding according to the immediate perception of perceptual norms (an inside view), integrated with the perception of the norms themselves as possibilities open to a horizon of meanings and whose definition is in process (an outside view), could inform a

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<sup>191</sup> I should note that Kelly's own thinking about perceptual norms develops in this very direction, although not at all explicitly based on Merleau-Ponty's thought in connection with levels of behaviour, gestalt thinking, or the norm as 'original look'. Cf. Sean Kelly, "Perceptual normativity and human freedom," unpublished draft paper presented at Cornell University's 'Perception and Action Symposium' (Ithaca, NY: 2006, May 7) <http://philpapers.org/rec/KELPNA>, where Kelly discusses what he himself takes as a fact of experience, that reflecting on perceptual norms and bringing them into perceptual focus, we seem to become 'freed' from their hold.

philosophy of art and creative work, and offer an avenue for understanding embodied human expressive activities from this existential-phenomenological point of view.

Merleau-Ponty seems aware of this free, creative possibility of normativity in his writing about painters, whom he describes as instituting new norms for seeing a thing, which expresses the world anew by ‘liberating’ the forms we see and by which we see.<sup>192</sup> Correspondingly, painters realize a formation of humanity’s way of seeing, throughout the stylized history of vision. The French painter Paul Cezanne, according to Merleau-Ponty in his later essay “Cezanne’s Doubt”, was able to capture the experience of original phenomenal definition of sense, in its process of becoming, through his painting work. I would say, further, that Cezanne expresses and in fact *paints* certain ordinary norms of seeing things, while at the same time revealing the things’ conditions of existence. For instance, the painter chooses to paint the perceptual figure on ground, which might express an ‘outside view’ of what for subject-body was a norm previously experienced only ‘from the inside’ (that is, a thing in the world the audience has never adopted a perspective on, such as the role of lighting or shadows in the composition of a scene, say). The painter testifies to the intimacy of inside and outside experienced by body-subject, and paints a perspective on a perceptual object without dislocating the perceptual object from its life in the perceptual world, presumably. The painter’s involvement with the world through painting would make evident that perceptual norms guide, and yet can be freely adopted, in an expressive mode of creative human subjectivity that is essentially embodied.

On such an approach to the question of painting or art, I would be understanding Merleau-Ponty’s conception of perceptual normativity as I have in this thesis, which is as based

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<sup>192</sup> Cf. John Sallis, “Liberating the Line” in *Merleau-Ponty at the Limits of Art, Religion, and Perception*, ed. Kascha Semonovitch and Neal De Roo, 21-29 (London: Continuum, 2010).

on Merleau-Ponty's modified use of the concept of gestalt perceptual structure or form as ontologically basic. I have understood Merleau-Ponty's comments on normativity in relation to the structure of 'looks'. These looks can be seen sedimenting in the temporal structure of our lives, or on the material surface of paintings that we keep visible in adorning our cultural world; and this, I think, normatively shapes our lives. This outlook helps us see how we might take pre-objective phenomena as perceptual *norms* that are at play as norms, tacitly compelling or asking us to move in certain ways, throughout all aspects of our experience and life.

Merleau-Ponty has had significant influence on the debates on perceptual normativity in the contemporary literature, in a crossover of influence on those doing both continental and analytic philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is cited to a high degree and serves as a touchstone by philosophers working out how consciousness involves a somatic intentionality, by which embodied subject engages the sensuous world meaningfully, in a way that is unmediated by representations or mental contents. Kelly, Lajoie, and Matherne, whose debate on Merleau-Ponty's view of perceptual normativity I have examined in this thesis, are examples of such commentators. I have shown that without careful interpretation of the context of Merleau-Ponty's comments on normativity, the novel sense of normativity that Merleau-Ponty applies to perception can easily be missed. Given this rising prominence of Merleau-Ponty's work on perception in the literature, particularly on normativity and the role of the body in perception, a careful interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion is needed. My interpretation has attempted to understand and appreciate the place of perceptual normativity in Merleau-Ponty's wider thought and meaning in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I believe this can serve as helpful for those attempting to draw on Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual norms for further purposes.

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