Notes on Taylor Carman, “SJPF”

**Empiricism: The Problem of Sensation** (cf. sense data, qualia, stimulus, “how things look”)

1. Perceptual experience is intentional. It’s composed of external things—tables, chairs, people, events, places, etc.—not sensations. Sensations are not objects of awareness. [51f]
2. To take sensations as objects of perception is to commit the **experience error** [applying the concept of the discrete, discernible, determinate properties of objects to sense impressions and treating those purported properties as if they were in experience.]
3. Thus, it’s a mistake to take properties of objects as **qualia** (qualities of experience) and to assume we have an “immediate epistemic acquaintance with those inner qualities on the basis of which we must infer or construct our knowledge of the world”. [54]
4. Perceptual objects are not given as “fully developed and determinate”. If they were, we would experience the elements of the visual field as clear and discrete units of perception, with the periphery bounded by darkness. But this is not at all how things look to us. The edges of the visual field are not clearly visible at all.
5. Consider also the Müller-Lyer illusion, melodies as opposed to a series of notes, etc. These phenomena cast serious doubt on the **constancy hypothesis**. [54]
6. Thus, “there is no isomorphism between the contents and causes of perception”. The constancy hypothesis must be revised.
7. Empiricist response: Sensations, which are caused by the stimuli, undergo modifications due to association and memory. [56]
8. But this proposal is both **obscure** and **circular**.
   a. It offers a general claim but doesn’t specify the causal mechanisms that drive the process.

   The sensation of one segment or path in the figure of a circle, for example, may trigger an association by resembling another, “but this resemblance means no more than that one path makes one think of the other,” so that our knowledge of objects “appears as a system of substitutions in which one impression announces others without ever justifying the announcement.” The introduction of association and memory in the analysis, that is, sheds no light on the putative transition from discrete atoms of sensation to a perceptually coherent gestalt. Instead, for empiricism, “the significance of the perceived is nothing but a cluster of images that begin to reappear without reason” (PP 22/15/17). [56]
   
   b. “The concepts of association and memory themselves presuppose the very perceptual significance they were supposed to explain.” [56]

Worse yet, the empiricist principle of the “association of ideas” takes for granted precisely the kind of perceptual coherence it is intended to explain. For what we in fact associate or group together, when we do, are things and the meaningful features of things, not sensations or atomic qualities, and a thing is a coherent whole, an ensemble, not a collection of discrete parts; “The parts of a thing are not bound together by a merely external association” (PP 23/15/18). Rather, the inner coherence of the things we perceive is what enables us to abstract aspects or features we can then associate with one another:

“It is not indifferent data that set about combining into a thing because de facto contiguities or resemblances cause them to associate; it is, on the contrary, because we perceive a grouping as a thing that the analytical attitude can then discern resemblances and contiguities.” (PP 23/16/18–19) [56f; emphasis added.]

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9. “The distinctions between figure and ground, things and the empty spaces between them, past and present are not rooted in sensation, but are “structures of consciousness irreducible to the qualities that appear in them” (PP 30/22/26).” [58]
10. Thus, empiricism lacks phenomenal and explanatory force.

Rationalism (Cognitivism): The Problem of Judgment

1. If the structure of experience does not come entirely from the external stimuli, it makes sense to look for the internal causes of experience. [58f]
2. Rationalists argue that determinate sensations “lie buried beneath the threshold of conscious awareness”, from which they can be uncovered.
3. Thus, perception is the result of thought or judgment. (This approach can be seen in both dualists, such as Descartes, and materialists today, such as Dennett.)

‘This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “intellectualist antithesis” of empiricism, which lies at the heart of Cartesian and Kantian epistemology and continues to inform cognitivist theories of perception today…. For Descartes and Kant, the very fact that it is things we see, as opposed to mere clusters of qualities, is due to our application of the concept of substance to the manifold of intuition provided passively by the senses.” [59]

4. But here, the rationalist also seems to appeal to the constancy hypothesis. (Cf. Descartes’ piece of wax, the determinate properties of which are more easily grasped by the mind than by the senses. [59]

‘Sensations, if they exist at all, are perfectly determinate but lie buried beneath the threshold of conscious awareness; then the spotlight of attention shines on them and brings them to consciousness. Thus, in the Second Meditation Descartes insists that objects are strictly speaking “perceived by the mind alone,” not by the senses. Perception of a piece of wax melting, changing its qualities, and yet remaining one and the same piece of wax is a “purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in.”

‘What is literally given in perception, then, the intellectualist and the empiricist agree, is fixed by the stimulus.’ [59]

5. Thus, employing a principle of synthesis, in Descartes’ interpretation, clarity depends on careful attention to the details in the mind.

‘But this means that attention and judgment can effect no change from perceptual obscurity to clarity after all because there was no confusion in the sensations themselves to begin with, only in the vagaries of intellect or will. Consequently, as Merleau-Ponty observes, “attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform.” It is not as if our experience is a muddle and then the mind operates on it and sorts it out, rather, perceptual indistinctness is always only a matter of failing to attend carefully and judge correctly. “What intellectualism lacks is contingency in the occasions of thought” (PP

[Carman’s note 8, 72.]

[Carman’s note 9, 72.]
In this way, empiricism and intellectualism are two sides of a coin, the former rendering the transition from experience to judgment inexplicable, the latter taking it for granted by building thought into the very definition of perceptual objectivity: “Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.” In both, “the indeterminate does not enter into the definition of the mind” (PP 36/28/33)."

6. The situation for Kant, who employs a principle of active synthesis, is parallel. To synthesize the object from the manifold of intuition, imagination and understanding must act on a determinate given phenomenon, i.e. a manifold of intuition. But the manifold of intuition is already a product of the faculties of judgment needed to constitute it as a particular determinate phenomenon. So, perception of the object is not explained by appeal to the cognitive powers, but presupposed by them.

7. Perceptual appearances turn out to be a mystery, i.e. impossible.

“Faces and handwriting undergo...jarring transformations of character when viewed upside down or backward yet their objective structures remain the same from a purely intellectual point of view. Thus, Merleau-Ponty concludes that intellectualism, like empiricism, tacitly thrives on the constancy hypothesis: the sensory stimuli are in a certain sense objectively the same forward as backward, right side up as upside down; therefore, the qualitative difference in perceptual aspect can only be an artifact of a change of intellectual attitude. You cannot see what is not there, so when a perceptual effect fails to correspond to the supplied stimulus, you are not literally seeing what you seem to see, but merely thinking you see it. Arguments purporting to uncover massive illusions in normal visual experience take the constancy hypothesis for granted in just this way.” [66]

The Phenomenal Field

“What Merleau-Ponty calls the “phenomenal field” is neither a representation nor a locus of representations, but a dimension of our bodily embeddedness in a perceptually coherent environment, a primitive aspect of our openness onto the world.” [51]

1. "For Merleau-Ponty, then, although perception is not grounded in sensations, the gestalts in which things are given perceptually constitute a primitive aspect of experience, irreducible to cognition: “there is a significance of the percept that has no equivalent in the universe of the understanding, a perceptual milieu that is not yet the objective world, a perceptual being that is not yet determinate being” (PP 58/46–7/54)."

2. “If the concept of sensation is incoherent and the reduction of perception to judgment untenable, how are we then to characterize the perceptual field phenomenologically?” [68]

3. For M-P, it’s crucial to find a path between empiricism and rationalism.

4. This “requires a new conceptual framework and a new descriptive vocabulary with which to understand intentionality as the necessary interconnectedness of experience and the world.” [68; emphases added.]

5. According to M-P, “perception itself...is neither a mere passive registration of stimuli nor a radically free initiation of mental acts, but...the way in which the body belongs to its environment, the essential interconnectedness of sensitivity and motor response.” [68; emphases added.]

6. The world and the body are understandable only in terms of one another. “[O]ur bodily orientation and skills constitute for us a normatively rich but noncognitive [reciprocal?] relation to the perceptual milieu.” [69] [Motor Intentionality (PP 128/110/127)]

7. “[O]ur body is not the object of an ‘I think’: it is an ensemble of lived meanings that moves to its equilibrium.” [69, M-P] [PP 179/153/177]

8. M-P introduces the concept of the “body-schema”, as opposed to the “body-image”. The body-schema is neither purely physiological nor mental. It is not an object of awareness. It is "the [non-representational and non-cognitive] skills and capacities that shape our awareness
of objects”. Cf. Kant’s schemata (rules and organizing principles) with M-P’s dispositions—“bodily poise or readiness”. [70]

9. These capacities and dispositions are both causal and normative, establishing (or making possible) the felt “rightness” or “wrongness” of bodily postures and positions.

10. Thus, “motor intentionality” is more basic than judgment and the application of concepts. [70]

“Perception is not just a mental or psychological effect in the mind, then, but the body’s intelligent orientation in the world. Abstracting perception from the body and from the world by equating it with sensation or judgment means doing violence to the concept of perception itself. More precisely, it means doing violence to the experience that affords us an understanding of perception in the first place, and surely the understanding of perception that is actually informed and motivated by experience is the one worth having.” [71]

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**Note on M-P’s Concept of Body Schema vs. “Body Image”**

Recall Kant’s distinctions among understanding, imagination, and sensibility, and their relation to concepts, intuitions, and schemata:

Schemata [for Kant]...are rules or procedures that issue from the faculty of imagination and specify the construction of sensible images adequate to pure concepts of the understanding. It is the imagination that carves out the space of possibilities within which objects can appear to us at all as objects of knowledge. What allows schemata to mediate the discursive categories of the understanding and the passive intuitions of sensibility, moreover, is the fact that they exhibit the a priori condition underlying all representation, both conceptual and intuitive, namely time. For time is both the form of inner sense, to which all appearances must necessarily conform, and the sequence or duration that makes intelligible the implementation and execution of a rule or procedure. This, in short, is why the term “body image” is liable to wreak havoc in philosophical accounts of embodiment, for we conceive of images as objects of awareness, whereas schemata are the capacities or dispositions that sketch out in advance and so structure our awareness of objects.

What is essential to...[Merleau-Ponty’s] concept of the body schema, and what it shares with its Kantian predecessor...is the notion of an integrated set of skills poised and ready to anticipate and incorporate a world prior to the application of concepts and the formation of thoughts and judgments. This kind of embodied poise or readiness, which Merleau-Ponty calls “habit,” consists in a kind of noncognitive, preconceptual “motor intentionality” (PP, 110). Habit is not a function of reflective thought, nor is it transparently accessible to reflection in pure consciousness, rather it manifests itself in the perceptual body as such: “it is the body that ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit” (PP, 144).

Cf. Shaun Gallagher’s characterization of the distinction between body image and body schema, which draws on recent research in cognitive psychology.

The body image consists of a complex set of intentional states—perceptions, mental representations, beliefs, and attitudes—in which the intentional object of such states is one’s own body. Thus the body image involves a reflective intentionality. Three modalities of this reflective intentionality are often distinguished in studies involving body image.

(a) the subject’s perceptual experience of his/her own body;
(b) the subject’s conceptual understanding (including mythical and/or scientific knowledge) of the body in general; and

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4 From: Taylor Carman, “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty”, *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 1999), 219. [Emphases added. References are to M-P’s *Phenomenology of Perception.*]
(c) the subject's **emotional attitude** toward his/her own body.

The latter two aspects, (b) and (c), do not always involve conscious awareness, but are maintained as a set of beliefs or attitudes and in that sense form part of an **intentional** system.

In contrast to the reflective intentionality of the body image, a body **schema** involves a system of motor capacities, abilities, and habits that enable movement and the maintenance of posture. The body schema is not a perception, a belief, or an attitude. Rather, it is a **system of motor and postural functions** that operate **below the level of self-referential intentionality**, although such functions can enter into and support intentional activity. The preconscious, subpersonal processes carried out by the body-schema system are tacitly keyed into the environment and play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement. Although the body-schema system can have specific effects on cognitive experience, it does not have the status of a **conscious representation** or **belief**.  

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Timothy Quigley, 2 Dec 09

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