

*Leaps in Perception:*  
*Towards a Philosophy of Imaginatively-endowed Perceiving*

Jade Rousseau

Submitted as partial fulfillment for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy

Haverford College

April 21st, 2023

First reader: Prof. Joël Yurdin

Second reader: Prof. Danielle Macbeth

## Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis was a particularly arduous process. I fought with *content* and with *style*; with the weight of the invaluable chance such an exercise is, and the realization that Bachelor thesis is merely, only, a Bachelor thesis; with the realization that even that could not be all, and with the hope that *that will not be all*.

If I cannot judge the end, the final product, I am immensely thankful for those who accompanied me, perhaps even upheld me through this journey.

Thank you to my friends and my parents, who listened to me rant and cry from frustration; who opened up themselves and their lives to my ideas and concerns, even when they didn't yet have any form. — Thank you Amolina, thank you Charlie. And thank you maman, thank you papa. Thank you so much.

Thank you to those who inspire me to believe that there is something in what is still immanent, latent, hidden; in what is blurry, evocative, and poetic (still yet and maybe forever to be articulated, if to be articulated is to be pinned down); that is 'true' in a way the 'true' never could be. That is both *below* and *above* that. Those who believe in the potential of this something I have yet to encompass. — Thank you Margot and thank you Ilana.

Thank you Professor Yurdin and Professor Macbeth for believing in the value of my perspective. This thesis is now written, and though the inquiries remains open, *this* is closed.

## Abstract

Inquiry into our perception soon leads us to a kind of skepticism, whereby we not only doubt that our senses give us access to the objective world, we doubt they give us access to anything at all. This is *the* problem of perception. At the heart of this problem lies a distance between us and the world. Introducing the concept of *perceptive faith*, I argue that our fundamental attitude towards the world is thus one of *leaping*. Using the lens of the *leap*, I first consider the way perception unfolds within us. I emphasize the importance of theorizing perception as a *lived perceiving*, and suggest that imagination may be necessary for our perceiving, as that which allows us to bridge the gaps and *give life to them*. I then consider two analytic theories of perception, drawing out their phenomenological sensibility, and suggest that if *intentionalism* begins to tie the world to us, *enactivism* embeds us firmly in the world. The distance between the world and us thus seems to be bridged when we realize perception is an embodied and imaginatively-endowed perceiving. I contend that such premises were ignored because of a pervasive *optocentrism* in Western philosophy, an overvaluation of *sight* and a devaluation of the other senses (especially of *touch*) which led certain problems, questions, and conclusions to appear at the expense of others. I conclude that a philosophy of perception that emphasized the *imaginary texture* of the world would allow us to unproblematically encompass both our being towards and away from the world.

## Introduction: The gap

Perception, as the story goes, is the process whereby we come to have knowledge of the world. Through our senses, we come to know and have access to the world; they are our windows to the world — a world that is objective and independent of us perceivers. Yet, such naïve understanding of perception soon encounters issues: the mere act of putting a pen in water and magically watching it bend awakens us to the idea that our senses are *fallible*. Illusions reveal to us that our senses can in fact be mistaken; that they do not always provide us with an accurate picture of the world; that they sometimes deceive us. Fooled, we learn that our senses cannot always be trusted; or rather, that *we* cannot always be trusted. It seems that we in some way *fall short of the reality of the world*. — But worse than illusions perhaps, worse than being mistaken about the real state of things, it seems we can be mistaken about there being anything at all: not only subject to illusions, we are subject to *hallucinations*. But if I can see and hear things that do not exist at all; if what I perceive can not only be a misrepresentation but really nothing at all, then can I really be certain that I am perceiving the world? Can I really be sure that there is a world, a world outside of myself, a world that isn't my internal world? It seems there is a distance between the world and us; a distance so large that we may doubt there is even something on the other side.

Thus arises a kind of skepticism. And this skepticism, once it has arisen, cannot be ignored. The seed of doubt has been planted. If philosophies of perception tend to articulate themselves around 'problems' — the problem of illusion, hallucination, blindsight, etc — the biggest problem of them all, *the* "problem of perception" is thus the "problem of the world". And yet, for all the difficulty that it is to formally refute skepticism (in part because of the tendency

for all-encompassing circularity of the argument), there is something that feels unsatisfactory about such conclusion. There is something that misses the point, the feeling, the experience of being. The doubt is warranted, the doubt has been instilled, but the doubt also seems so far from us. After all, whether all this be a product of my imagination or not, it remains that to live necessitates me assuming that the world *is* real. My actions are predicated on the necessary assumption that, to a significant extent, I *do* have access to this world. Can I know for sure? Perhaps not. And yet, yet, in some way I am certain. And surely, you, because I believe there is indeed a you, also are.

There is therefore a tension at the heart of any inquiry into perception. A tension which is exacerbated, and thus perhaps made more difficult to address by the very nature of the philosopher's inquiry, for, as Merleau-Ponty put it in the opening lines of *The Visible and the Invisible*:

“We see the things themselves, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher from the moment he opens his eyes; they refer to a deep-seated set of mute “opinions” implicated in our lives. But what is strange about this faith is that if we seek to articulate it into theses or statements, if we ask ourselves what is this *we*, what *seeing* is, and what *thing* or *world* is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions. What Saint Augustine said of time— that it is perfectly familiar to each, but that none of us can explain it to the others— must be said of the world. “[Ceaselessly, the philosopher finds himself] obliged to reinspect and redefine the most well-grounded notions, to

create new ones, with new words to designate them, to undertake a true reform of the understanding— at whose term the evidence of the world, which seemed indeed to be the clearest of truths, is supported by the seemingly most sophisticated thoughts, before which the natural man now no longer recognizes where he stood” (Merleau-Ponty, 17)

This tension is thus in some way always already resolved in our own existence: I can ask myself these questions, I can doubt the whole wide world and yet somebody will call me and I will answer. And maybe I’ll even turn around and trip and fall flat on the grass. And I’ll have forgotten all of my questions, all of my worries, if only momentarily. Struck by the world. Before thinking, there is perceiving; insofar as before we ever have thought, we have perceived. “All we know we know through perception” (Stroud), inasmuch as there was never a before perception; all was built upon the foundation, the necessary premise that is perceiving. And not only perceiving, but believing that perceiving tells us of, situates us in the world. Perception comes undistinguished from an “*unjustifiable certitude in a shared sensible world common to us*”<sup>1</sup>. This is why a child can close her eyes and *disappear*: it is not that she does not believe in the reality of the world, but on the contrary, that she assumes her world is *the* world: what is for her is for her *absolutely*”<sup>2</sup>. We have a “naive *certitude* of the world, an *anticipation* of an intelligible world”<sup>3</sup>. This we may call, along with Merleau-Ponty, *perceptive faith*. “Faith” allows us to leave the question open, to embrace both sides of this tension without having to rationally and

---

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 29.

exclusively *choose*, because we are not pausing in front of an irresolvable distance, we are already jumping, taking a *leap*, a leap of faith.

— If *perceptive faith* is our fundamental attitude, I contend that the lens of the leap, the realization that perception is full of leaps, may reveal something about this problem and perception in general.

## Part I: Leaps within

The problem of the world thus being a problem of *distance*, of the distance between the world and us, it presupposes a sharp distinction between the two, between the external and the internal. If both the external and our link to it are problematic, then let us thus start from that which we are certain of the existence of, let us start from the internal. We shall see that ‘problematic’ gaps and distances are already found *within*, such that we, again, are consistently taking *leaps*.

Our perceptual experience is phenomenally marked by *continuity*. But this naive phenomenal picture seems again challenged by reflection. Indeed, it is commonly claimed in the philosophy of perception that perception is made up of *discrete* perceptions, which are only subsequently and internally made continuous. The cohesion of our perception is an illusion that hides the gaps that exist in between distinct moments of perception. Though this idea might seem odd at first, it is in fact more common and intuitive than it may appear. It is, for example, the principle behind film: a film is not really a continuous video, rather it is a rapidly changing sequence of images; the fixed images create the illusion of movement when they change fast enough and when they are related enough. This posit is further supported by vulgarized science, for which the debate isn’t so much *whether* but *how many* “frames per second” we see at. The idea is thus that this is the way we always perceive: we *feign* continuity out of initially discrete perceptions. — Note though that whether we *always* do or don’t perceive in this way, it remains that *we can*: we can see a sequence of disconnected images and connect them such that they melt

into each other, becoming one continuous movement. This gives rise to the ‘*problem of continuity*’: the problem of how we *bridge* the *gaps* between our perceptions.

This ‘problem’ is related to another problem, *the problem of the enduring existence of objects*: the problem of how, from separate perceptions, we infer that objects persist through time as independent entities. For example, how do I realize that the cup I was looking at and then looked away from is the same when I turn back around? Of course, this inference may be mistaken — the cup may have been replaced by a similar looking cup without my being aware of it, or even by a not-so-similar cup without my noticing that difference either — but the question remains: how can I infer that this cup *could be* the same as that cup, that it could have *persisted* in its *independent existence* when I was looking away?

Both problems are themselves related to the *problem of incompleteness*: the problem of how, even though we only ever have an incomplete view of things, we still make claims about, and somehow believe we have access to, the thing in its entirety. Indeed, save perhaps for a completely transparent object, when we *look* at anything, we are only looking at a side, an aspect of it; and yet we claim we do see *it*. We do not “encounter the world as made up of partial and incomplete manifestations of things”<sup>4</sup>; despite perspectival limitations, we experience our perceptual objects as having a certain *unity*. Our perceptual experience is indeed phenomenally marked not only by continuity but also by a certain *fullness*. — Incompleteness and enduring existence are instances of a broader phenomenon of *perceptual presence*, whereby that which isn’t directly perceived is nonetheless part of our perception. For example, even though I neither

---

<sup>4</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 77.

see nor hear nor touch it at all, there is a sense in which the door that is behind me is nonetheless part of my perceptual field; has a significance, an existence, a presence.

These problems are thus all contending with *gaps* which, despite being *constitutive* of perception, we are not phenomenally aware of; leaps we seem to unconsciously be making, and which we generally do not experience problematically (a magic trick though precisely plays upon that; in return we might try ‘see through the trick’), for out of these gaps arises a coherence, a unity, a fulness. The questions are thus *how do we fill those gaps? what is the nature of the leaps we must be making?* And in classical philosophical terms, *what faculty is responsible for our leaping? For giving unity, coherence, and fulness to our perception?* As Gosseti-Ferencei argues in her book on *The Life of Imagination*, what could encompass all of these is *the imagination*.

The imagination, ever since Aristotle’s articulation of it as *phantasia*, has had so many articulations it is unclear whether one could even give a coherent definition that would encompass them all (SEP, “Imagination”). But doing so isn’t necessary. What matters here is not what the imagination truly *is*, but the constellation of faculties it has come to encompass; what the attribution of this bridging to the imagination thus reveals about the leaps in perception, and about perception more generally. The lexical field of the imagination includes fiction, fantasies, fabulation, dreams, etc, and the imagination is primarily drawn upon by philosophies of perception for (i) its *synthetic power*, (ii) its integration of *potentiality* with the given, (iii) its

*representational capacity*, and (iv) its mysteriousness, its magical *je-ne-sais-quoi* that forever evades our grasp<sup>5</sup>.

Strawson, for example, argues in his influential essay on *Perception and Imagination* that for both Hume and Kant, “imagination is conceived as a connecting or uniting power which operates in two dimensions”: “it connects perceptions of different objects of the same kind, [and] it connects different perceptions of the same object of a given kind”<sup>6</sup>, such that it seems the “imagination is involved *productively* in the background of conscious experience”<sup>7</sup>. The problem of continuity is thus solved by “the synthesis of imagination”<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, for Hume, the “imagination engenders so strong a propensity to confound the similarity of temporally separated and hence non-identical perceptions with strict identity through time that, in defiance of sense and reason combined, we feign, and believe in, a continued existence of perceptions where there is patently no such thing; and so strong is the hold of this belief that, when the discrepancy is pointed out, the imagination can still find an ally in certain philosophers who try, though vainly, to satisfy reason and imagination at the same time by conceiving of objects as different in kind from perceptions and ascribing continued existence to the former and interrupted existence only to the latter”<sup>9</sup>. In such cases, the imagination is also often arrived at differentially: since the faculty responsible for the problem at hand can neither be the senses themselves nor thought,

---

<sup>5</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Strawson, “Imagination and Perception”, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Strawson, “Imagination and Perception”, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Strawson, “Imagination and Perception”, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Strawson, “Imagination and Perception”, 54.

since it is neither a matter of opinion nor belief, etc, since there is something about what is going on that we just can't quite understand and pin down, it must be the imagination. For Hume, the imagination is thus "a kind of magical faculty [...] inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding"<sup>10</sup>. And indeed, there is something magical about these leaps. They cannot be linear, simply a matter of connecting lines between two frames. When looking at the distinct pages of a flip book, even if I know the images are sequential, they are still; they are the skeleton of a movement, of a scene waiting to unfold, a *nature morte*<sup>11</sup>. But when I flip them, the magic happens and movement occurs: the story is endowed with *life*. It cannot merely be an inference; these leaps have to be infused with something *more*, for they are how *still life* comes to be *movement*, how a *nature morte* comes alive.

Aristotle, who first articulated the imagination (as *phantasia*), thus described it as a *movement*, deeply entwined with and involved in perception<sup>12</sup>. For him, imagination both *is* and *creates* movement: it allows sensations to have movement as "the power whereby sensation is capable of generating a likeness of itself which survives it" (White, 496), and allows sensation to persist in the individual (White, 503). Imagination thus allows us to form perceptual experience by *integrating the possible with the given*<sup>13</sup>. Both the phenomena of incompleteness and of the endurance of objects point to our going beyond our experience of objects as such, since we experience them "as transcending, or going beyond, [our] experience of them". That is, we

---

<sup>10</sup> Strawson, "Imagination and Perception", 53.

<sup>11</sup> "still-life" in French: literally, "dead nature"

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, 429a2, 459a19.

<sup>13</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 5.

ourselves go beyond the given, and integrate *potentiality* into the very nature of what it means to perceive an object.

Behind these problems also crucially lies *time*. For example, the problem of continuity asks how, from discrete instantaneous perceptions, we experience temporal continuity; and the problem of object constancy asks how we infer that objects remain through time, even when we lose sight of them. But the framing of these problems assumes that we can take for granted that which isn't in time, the instant of perception. Consider though the famous case of horses galloping: when horses gallop, their legs move fast, arguably "too fast for our eyes to see". And thus prior to the invention of photography, painters represented the legs of galloping horses in a variety of positions (the front and back legs stretched out being a common one). When a galloping horse was photographed for the first time (one of the first instances of the use of photography), we discovered that their legs did not stretch out at all, that most of the positions we had imagined were wrong, that our attempt to capture their galloping at a frozen moment, to "stop on the image" had outstandingly often failed. The movement had superseded, or rather had always been there prior, to the 'accurate' frozen image. A view of perception which attended to the parts (discrete perceptions) to better consider the whole (perceptual experience), would thus be making a mistake: our seeing is not a camera, the stills do not come prior to the movement; to see a horse gallop is less to see it at various moments of the movement, and more to see the movement itself. And thus we cannot analyze how we come to the stills *and only then* consider how they come to be movement; analyze an instant of perception and not perception through/of time.

Neuroscientific findings corroborate such reading to the extent that research suggests that “what you are seeing at the present moment is not a fresh snapshot of the world but rather an average of what you’ve seen in the past 10 to 15 seconds”<sup>14</sup>. Thus, not only are perceptions fleeting, evanescent; experiences of a present that is always already the past; but they may have never even been ‘pure’ experiences of the present. And if the past is involved in perceptual experience, then *memory* is involved. And if memory is involved, then deformation, transformation, fabulation, ... imagination, are also. The link between imagination and memory is twofold: on the one hand, memory necessarily involves imaginative contagion and on the other hand, “imagination—in its *presentational mode* of “imagining”—allows the mind to reconstruct from memory”<sup>15</sup>. The necessity for leaps thus arises when perception is considered *in time*, when what is considered is not merely the *instant* of perception, but *lived perception*, perception which is always happening in and through time.

Too often accounts of perception commit what one might call the *fallacy of perception as a phenomenon*: they consider perception as a phenomena dissociated from time, and dissociated from a perceiver. Entire essays on perception thus fail to mention that perceiving is contingent upon somebody, is an experience or a doing. Perceiving is killed and made into an object to be dissected. Such fallacy is more pervasive than one may initially think. For example, consider a quote from the article reporting on the research aforementioned: “this helps create a stable environment, *despite sacrificing some accuracy*”<sup>16</sup>. — Sacrificing accuracy compared to what?

---

<sup>14</sup> Kim, “What You're Seeing Right Now Is a Composite of Images Past and Present, Researchers Find”.

<sup>15</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, “What You're Seeing Right Now Is a Composite of Images Past and Present, Researchers Find”.

If to perceive the present necessarily involves integrating it in the past, *if that is how we perceive*, then there has never been more accuracy! The “despite” is predicated upon an idealist conception of a disembodied perception. But this quote also relies on the connection between such fallacy and the idea that perception is defined by its aim for *objectivity* and *veridicality*. The problem of the fallibility of our senses arose (and arises) in the context of philosophies of perception which take veridicality to be what perception aims at. Since our senses should provide us with an objectively accurate view of the world, that they do not represents a failure, an unacceptable problem.

Our inquiry into the leaps which are constitutive of *perception as it unfolds within* has revealed the presence of imagination in within them, the imagination as responsible for them. But if perception inherently deploys itself through internal imaginative leaps, and the imagination is a faculty tied to the *fictional*, the *false*, the *fantasmagorical*, then the objective never lives within us. And so even before we consider our relationship to the world. If imagination is often represented as “distorting” perception, “corrupting” it, as “the enemy” of reason and of the real — such that, Gosseti-Ferencei explains, rationalist, skeptic, and empiricist philosophers all condemn imagination<sup>17</sup>— we have suggested that perceiving may need imagination to unfold, such that there is no “it” to be corrupted, “it” was always already corrupted. But if for sensory perceptions to be more than individual, fleeting sensory snapshots, if for sensations to be more than the spectacle of a stillborn life, they need to be made movement using imagination such that only then do we “actually” experience the external living world perception gives us access to; then our perceptions are precisely alive because imagination

---

<sup>17</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 94.

*feigns, fabulates, creatively connects, and integrates the possible with the given*<sup>18</sup>, giving movement and life to the gaps it leaps over. The presence of these gaps, which need to be bridged, crossed, infused life and movement into, thus further suggest perceiving may not only be lived, but be *active* insofar as the world is not merely taken in as such, it is integrated and enriched. Thus, even if our senses are our windows to the world such that the perceiver is but a a “pure spectator”<sup>19</sup>, spectatorship would involve leaping, bridging, imagining. If the standard view of perception is that we passively take in the objective, independent, real world; and if the doubt then generally lies in the existence of such a world, our considerations have suggested that the doubt may instead lie in our ‘passively taking in’. — Here, we may note that evacuating imagination from perception and presenting them as opposites, as two sides of a dichotomy, is correlated with a characterization of perception as *passive* (e.g. Wittgenstein argues that imagination and perception are not confusable since imagination is active and subject to the will, while perception is passive and not subject to the will<sup>20</sup>). — If spectators we are then our spectatorship involves fabulating a play out of the world.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 103.

## Part II: Leaps towards

### Intentionalist theories: perception as world-directed

The lens of the leap has revealed much about the unfolding of perceiving *within*. Let us thus now turn to the world, to the leap we take towards a world. The possibility that perception involves a leap towards the world; that in perceiving we are aiming at the world, is what intentionalist theories will point us to.

Intentionalist theories of perception are directly responding to a certain kind of answer to the problem of the world, which argues that perception does not give us access to the world itself; merely to *appearances*. These appearances, called *sense-datum*, are not *of the world* but of our minds. But intentionalist theories point out that from an internal perspective, perception is *as of objects*; it has *content*, content which at least claims to be of the world. Perception is defined by an essential *aboutness*. That is, all seeing is *seeing-that* or *seeing-as* since “the thought of something as an *x* or as a particular *x* is alive in the perception of it as an *x* or as a particular *x* just as the thought of an *x* or a particular *x* is alive in the having an image of an *x* or a particular *x*”<sup>21</sup>. Intentionalist theories of perception thus claim that our perceptions are *representational states* with *intentional content*. Perception is like other intentional states such as belief or desire in that it is *directed at* something, where this something may or may not in fact exist (as in the case of ‘nonveridical perceptions’).

Intentionalist theories of perception thus begin to blur the line of the “spatial metaphor for internal and external, or inner and outer”<sup>22</sup>. Since to consider perception ‘within’ is already to

---

<sup>21</sup> Strawson, “Imagination and perception”, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Searle, “The Intentionality of Perception”, 37.

consider ‘without’, then “in what sense exactly are my perceptual experiences ‘in here’ and the world ‘out there’?”<sup>23</sup>. A self-contained and self-directed ‘internal’ is a myth, a fantasy. — But most intentionalist theories do not go far enough into the potential of intentionality. In claiming for example that “visual perception, like belief, and unlike desire and intention, always has the mind-to-world direction of fit”<sup>24</sup>, Searle is maintaining a fundamental distinction between the mind and the world. There is no relation; the mind aims at the world in a unilateral gaze; this is a *passive* form of aiming, a looking at, not a leaping.

Anscombe takes the intentionalist argument further and argues that our perception is an *intentional action* whereby we *aim at the world*. Focusing on English grammar, she identifies (at least) three features of intentional action in the way *verbs* of sense perception are used: (i) *non-substitutability*: that not every true description of the action is one under which it is done intentionally, (ii) *indeterminacy*: that something can be intended under a vague description, and (iii) *existence-neutrality*: that something can be intended under a description which does not come true, despite one acting on that intention. Since we both express ourselves and understand others in this way, this suggests that perception not only allows for such features, perhaps as defects, but is positively experienced *with* them; that these may not be constraints, but the space in which perceptual experience deploys itself. Indeed, imagine you are looking at a tree full of leaves. Imagine that this tree objectively contains 10, 001 leaves. Do you see 10, 001 distinct leaves? It would be absurd to say that you are. This is an innumerable amount that surely you

---

<sup>23</sup> Searle, “The Intentionality of Perception, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Searle, “The Intentionality of Perception, 42.

have no knowledge of. Even then, should we say that you see all of these leaves as *distinct*? A theory of perception which claims that we perceive the *state of things*, the *facts* of the world would suggest that you do. But, again, this seems an absurd consequence. *Who sees 10, 001 leaves all at once?* Clearly, nobody. What you see is an indeterminate aggregate of leaves, leaves which may blur in and out of distinctness but which are never all at once separate. They form a sort of whole, a foliage. Philosophies which claim otherwise are not interested in who, they are interested in the phenomena; they are committing the fallacy of considering *perception* as a phenomena distinct from a perceiver, considering the *what* before considering the *who*, when there is only the former because there is the latter. Anscombe is thus bringing to the fore the intentionalist concern for the phenomenal character of perception: for the fact that there isn't simply *perception*, but *something that it is like* to perceive. And attending to this reveals that *intentionality* and *indeterminacy* are integral parts of perception. This is echoed in Phenomenological accounts of perception, for which the inherence of intentionality and indeterminacy within perception are basic insights, since the subjective experience is the primary fact<sup>25</sup>. Burge suggests that this is echoed in the efforts of psychology to modify its own approach so as to integrate the 'failures' of our perception into its very definition: no longer 'problems' to be fixed, but *biases* to acknowledge and work with<sup>26</sup>.

It seems that such phenomena may not be *distortions* of perception, but intrinsic to perception, such that the perceiver does not ever perceive the world *as it is*, i.e. as it would be completely independently from herself. Thus, perceiving may not only share the same structure

---

<sup>25</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Burge, "Disjunctivism and perceptual psychology"

as other intentional states such as *belief* or *desire* in that it is directed at something which may or may not really exist (as in the case of “non-veridical perceptions”), but also in that its object may be incomplete, slightly incoherent, fantasized. ... Such conclusion echoes the conclusion of Part I, whereby the lexical field of the imaginary is integrated into the very structure of perceiving; and if that is so, then then the binary distinction between the real and the illusory blurs. The real isn’t so completely and solely *in the world out there*, it is always already also *in there*.

### Enactivist theories: perception as world-embedded

If considering intentionalist theories of perception has thus suggested that in perceiving we aim towards the world, *Enactivism* argues that perceiving is not world-directed, it is world-embedded<sup>27</sup>. If the perceiver remains fundamentally distant, separated, from the world; if the boundary between the internal and the external remains in intentionalist theories of perception, it is that such theories of perception have not *embodied* perception enough. Indeed, the world does not merely *appear* to us, rather we come to know it through constant *exploration*. We experience how things are by understanding their *sensorimotor profile*: how the way it is experienced varies, or would vary, with *movement*. Experience acquires content through activity and past or present dynamic interaction with the environment<sup>28</sup> such that perceiving is “inherently active”<sup>29</sup>. Enactivism importantly grounds itself in current neuroscience. whose findings also suggest that movement is necessarily involved in perceiving — e.g. constant rapid-eye movements seem to

---

<sup>27</sup> Enactivism heavily draws upon Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as outlined in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

<sup>28</sup> Noë, *Action in perception*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> Noë, *Action in perception*, 3.

be necessary for us to properly *see* anything at all — and that looking at objects involves unconsciously ‘simulating’ an action, such that “drawing a sharp line between acting and perceiving” becomes impossible<sup>30</sup>. Since perceiving involves an *empiètement*<sup>31</sup>, *it is inept to talk about boundaries*. In this dialectic of milieu and action, we “*faisons corps*” (literally “make-body”, to be one) with the world, such that there is no *distance* between us and the world<sup>32</sup>; we are totally absorbed in the world<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, if perceiving is importantly tied to the past (as we saw previously), it is also importantly tied to the future. It is *future-oriented*. And since it involves projection into the future and anticipation of possibilities, it must involve imagination. Indeed, imagination allows us to recognize “potentialities of the world as it is known to us through perception and reflection on it”<sup>34</sup> and is thus required for future-directed action<sup>35</sup>. Though not mentioned in the articulation of Enactivism (at least in *Perception in action*, the book in which Alva Noë develops this theory), as Gosseti-Ferencei argues, “enactivists may ascribe our capacity for perceptual recognition to our bodily skills, but this must be supplemented with the imaginative projection of possibility”<sup>36</sup>. The coherence and sense of perception thus emerges “through the dynamic relation and feedback

---

<sup>30</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 76.

<sup>31</sup> French term for “encroaching” — carries the root for “step”, “foot”: *a stepping into, onto*

<sup>32</sup> Dreyfus, “The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental”, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Dreyfus, “The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental”, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 78.

between embodied perception and action and the surrounding world”<sup>37</sup> such that bodily experience and imaginative participation support each other. For example, we reach out to objects differently depending on what they are, carefully though often unconsciously orienting our hand and gaging our force. The extent to which our “interactions are informed by potentialities implicit in the actualized perception”<sup>38</sup> was in fact made glaring by our struggle to create robots which would successfully adapt to the object it was to grasp (and not shatter to cup it was to seize). Neuroscience, too, connects the perception of objects with potential engagement, since “canonical neurons” fire in anticipation of action, such that “looking at objects means to unconsciously ‘simulate’ an action”. Neurology thus further suggests “the impossibility of drawing a sharp line between acting and perceiving.”<sup>39</sup> “These potentialities precisely *as potentialities* also consummate and fill out perceptual experience”<sup>40</sup> and thus imagination fills out perception. If perception in and of the world thus echoes its unfolding “within” us, this time the world isn’t “received through disparate sensations that have to be unified by the mind”<sup>41</sup>, since to some extent “the and sense that objects come to have for us emerge through the dynamic relation and feedback between embodied perception and action and the surrounding world”<sup>42</sup>.

---

<sup>37</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 76.

<sup>40</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 79.

<sup>41</sup> This is also echoed in recent affordance theories of perception.

<sup>42</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 75.

## Bridging the distance

The distance between the world and us is thus bridged when we realize that perception is really an *embodied and imaginatively-endowed perceiving*. — But, one might ask, if the answer was so “obvious”, so clearly within reach, then, how could we have gotten stuck on this problem for so long? I believe a significant part of the answer lies in *optocentrism*; in that sight has for too long been the unacknowledged starting point. Western philosophy’s privileging of sight above all the other senses has determined the ways the questions, the problems, the answers, have appeared. Introducing the project of *Carnal Hermeneutics*, Kearney explains that “the rationalist dualism of reason versus flesh prevailed in the Western metaphysical tradition from Plato to Kant until it was radically challenged when Husserl restored the primacy of the ‘flesh’ (*Leib*) as a living body constitutive of psychic reality”<sup>43</sup>. Sight, deemed the most theoretical sense “in that it allowed for the most distance and detachment”<sup>44</sup> was overvalued, while tactile senses (touch and to some extent taste), thought to be tied to an undesirable animal and irrational side of us, were devalued. A familiar hierarchy of the senses arose, where the “epistemological depreciation of the ‘lower’ senses had a moral corollary”<sup>45</sup>. If such optocentrism extends all the way to Western metaphysics <sup>46</sup>— and is tied to a general depreciation of the body, of the feminine, of the other, etc<sup>47 48 49</sup> — it is clearly apparent in

---

<sup>43</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 24.

<sup>45</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Kearney, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.

<sup>48</sup> Senghor, *On African Socialism*.

<sup>49</sup> Oyěwùmí, “Visualizing the body: Western theories and African subjects”

theories of perception, where sight is taken to be the paradigmatic sense, the sense through which all of perception, all of perceiving, can be understood. — And indeed, it has evocatively already come through in this thesis, especially in the articulation of the long-standing ‘problems’ within the Philosophy of perception. — The other senses are given little to no place: used instrumentally in few examples, potential divergences with visual experiences are rarely if ever seriously considered. For example, even Alva Noë, whose Enactivist philosophy is crucially embodied, tends to use “seeing”, “encountering”, and “experiencing” interchangeably, as though ‘seeing’ exhausted all that experiencing was.

It is no coincidence that distance came to be the root of our concerns with perception: sight is precisely the sense of distance! And the most devalued senses are precisely the senses of contact! It is no coincidence that embodiment (*incarnation*) was an evidence understated for so long: touch is precisely the sense of embodiment! Sight involves a *distance* that perhaps no other sense does. The object of sight is always distant: an object too close will simply not be seen. And even when I see myself, I see myself only as an object, as an other; whereas I can hear and feel myself from within. sound enters and reverberates through me, and smell sips in and overwhelms me (this is true also from a chemical stand point, whereby for e.g. smell involves molecules literally entering, and entering into a reaction with you). Sight, for all of its virtues, is also the sense of *detachment*. It allows for the illusion that perception is not a relation: that the perceiver can perceive and not be perceived in return; and that perceiving is not already an acting which in some way changes the perceived (this is the illusion of the camera, of the documentarist who can merely record and not change — c.f. problem of continuity as a cinematographic model of sense

perception). (Feminist thought has pointed out that there is always a reflexivity of the sensible<sup>50</sup> even for sight. Just hasn't been emphasized. e.g. the masculine gaze which takes itself to be neutral, to not be a gaze.)

If we began our inquiry with touch — which is arguably “our most vital sense” (Kearney), the sense without which we could not be (Aristotle) — would we ask the same questions, articulate our philosophies around the same concepts, get stuck on the same problems? Most likely not. The existential and phenomenological experience of touch is radically different. If sight is the sense of detachment, then touch is the sense of implication. From tactile interactions we never leave intact, we change and are changed. Our interactions always leave residues, they are necessarily sticky, and our boundaries are porous (Esner points out that this has long been feared, seen an existential threat<sup>51</sup>). Touch makes the *intimacy, reversibility, porosity* of perceiving manifest.

Of course, the senses are intertwined in our day-to-day experience and perhaps even in their very functioning. For example, Herder argues that sight is really “sight guided by touch”: isolated, our sense of sight would only really give us access to a flat surface, a world without depth, intangible and thus unreal, indistinguishable from a mirage, barely a world at all. But sight is not isolated: we learnt to associate meaning and depth to the flat surface of the visual by ceaselessly exploring through touch from the moment we were born (e.g. children putting in their mouths a dangerous amount of objects). Indeed, if seeing seems to reveal *appearances* (as so many philosophies of perception have pointed out), touching perhaps reveals first and foremost

---

<sup>50</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, 33.

<sup>51</sup> Esner, “The Dough that Kneads the Kneader: an Exploration of the Self and the Viscous”.

*presence*: not *what* something is, but *that it is*. This thesis began with the claim that our fundamental attitude was one of *perceptive faith* “in things and the world [,] the conviction it gives us of attaining what is by an absolute flight over (*survol*)”<sup>52</sup>, but if we started from touch, we would realize that we first attain *what is* from being confronted with its existence.

Before any leap, before everything else perhaps, there is *presence*. The presence of the world; the certitude that, despite the doubt that skeptic thoughts may seed within us, there is a world, and the world is there, and we are *in* the world, we are *with* the world. Or perhaps there is both, at once. “I can ask myself these questions, I can doubt the whole wide world and yet somebody will call me and I will answer. And maybe I’ll even turn around and trip and fall flat on the grass.” *I heard* and *I touched*. I crashed into the world and the world crashed into me, and *it brought me back to my senses* in a way that sight may never have, for even the most gruesome things can remain but a spectacle to the one who merely observes. There is in embodiment, in incarnation, a sense of *under*, of *there*, of *here* which goes beyond doubt. *And yet we doubt*. *Perceptive faith* can be both. Rather than merely being a constant leap towards, we can understand *perceptive faith* as pointing to the possibility of a paradoxical attitude whereby there is both a leaping and an anchorage; whereby the presence of the world is an evidence, a certitude for there is a fundamental *perceptive presence* of the world, but where there is also room for doubt. *Perceptive faith* is *en deçà*: “*below* affirmation and negation, *below* judgment”<sup>53</sup>.

---

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 47.

## Conclusion

The lens of the leap has thus revealed that perception is not the window through which we take in an objective world, it is *the leap through which we inhabit a world with an imaginary texture*. I have gestured towards a philosophy of perception which rests upon the pillars of perceptive faith, incarnation, and imagination. Anchored and yet constantly leaping, embedded and yet transcending. These seemingly conflicting attitudes are at the core of coming into the “problem of the world”, and at the core of our articulation of perceptive faith; and perception thus conceived allows us to unproblematically encompass both these attitudes *towards* and *away from* the world.

Indeed, our life is filled with ‘imaginative attitudes’: we believe, desire, fantasize, long, and daydream. And these attitudes, these departures from the world *as it is right now*; from what we tend to think of as the world as such, do not enter in conflict with our relation to the real nearly as much as the pervasive objectivist antagonism between the real and the illusory, the real and the fictional suggest: they do not ‘negate’ or ‘suppress’ reality<sup>54</sup>. We have a tendency to “confound the fictional with the false” (cite) — but isn’t there a way in which the child sees the monster in the dark? Gosseti-Ferencei points out that “the boundary between reality and the magical world of fairy tales or other fictions is not absolute and is far more fluid for children than for adult minds”<sup>55</sup>, but can’t that extend to adults too? Is the “suspension of objective truth” so wrong? Must we exhaust itself in a quest for an objective world? For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomena of hallucination suggests that there is a common ground between the real and the

---

<sup>54</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 92.

imaginary since the unreal, if only for just a moment, passes as reality<sup>56</sup>. And indeed, there is “in the perceived a part of conjecture, of ambiguity”<sup>57</sup>. The closed reality of the natural sciences may not be the reality of our senses, and that is *fantastic*, both literally and figuratively. Though perception is not imagination, and the imaginary isn’t the real, the line is blurry. The ‘real’ that we perceive is always tinted by the imaginary. They are intertwined, interwoven, each stepping into the other, each supplementing the other. That imagination weaves through perception is part of what makes perception so rich! It may be why if we might take in ‘less than’ the world, we also take in more: “the aesthetic, symbolic, and affective amplification of perception through imagination”<sup>58</sup> infuses experience with an intensity, intimacy and a poetry<sup>59</sup>. As Merleau-Ponty argued, “perception conceived as mere positive registration of determinate being—exhaustively present in immediate “observation, a close-woven fabric, without any gaps”—would never capture the vitality and potentiality inherent in the perception of a living and embodied consciousness”<sup>60</sup>.

Perception isn’t merely about what is *there*, it is also about the ‘above’ and the ‘below’.

The ‘real’ isn’t merely what is ‘factually’ there, there is “a presence of the immanent, the latent,

---

<sup>56</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 347.

<sup>57</sup> Sartre, “L’imaginaire Psychologie Phénoménologique de L’Imagination”.

<sup>58</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 71.

<sup>59</sup> I am thus advocating for a philosophy of perception which attends to the richness and intensities of perceptual experience; a philosophy of perception which attends to ‘mundane perception’ — I see a cup, smell the tea, reach out to it, drink from it, and set it down with a clunk — but also to the way perceiving allows for aesthetic experience, disgust, and ecstasy. . . . I believe that the kind of philosophy which would arise from the premises outlined would for example be able to better account for the kind of experience art may generate: for our looking at Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” and experiencing *what it feels like* to see the night sky, for our hearing a haiku which describes a scene, an atmosphere, a time, better than any lengthy factual description could ever, . . . (Scientific research also seems to suggest that “the departures from precise resemblances have the effect of provoking a more emotional response to the visually perceived” (Gosseti-Ferencei, 133))

<sup>60</sup> Gosseti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination*, 81.

or the hidden”<sup>61</sup>. There is what is ‘right’, what is ‘true’, and then there is what is *felt* and what is *dreamt* and I contend that to perceive is all of this. Our two ‘antithetical’ attitudes, into and away, in and transcending, are integral parts of how we experience the world. Because we are anchored, because the world always has presence even when we are lost in fictive worlds, ‘in our minds’, we are not *lost*. The tangible always accompanies us in the intangible. Felt embodiment and imaginative departures are “two possible versions of the same fundamental adhesion to the world”<sup>62</sup> that lie at once underneath and above doubt.

---

<sup>61</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, 81.

<sup>62</sup> Lapierre, “Le fondement imaginaire du perçu chez Merleau-Ponty et Grimaldi”, 357.

## Bibliography

Anscombe, G. E. M. "The intentionality of sensation: A grammatical feature." *Vision and mind: Selected readings in the philosophy of perception* (1965): 55-75.

Barnes, Jonathan, ed. *Complete works of Aristotle, volume 1: The revised Oxford translation*. Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 1984.

Burge, Tyler. "Disjunctivism and perceptual psychology." *Philosophical Topics* 33.1 (2005): 1-78.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. "The Myth of the Pervasiveness of the Mental." *Mind, reason, and being-in-the-world*. Routledge, 2013. 25-50.

Esner, Sofia. "The Dough that Kneads the Kneader: an Exploration of the Self and the Viscous" (2022).

Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and making the world*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Routledge, 2020.

Kearney, Richard. "The wager of carnal hermeneutics". *Carnal Hermeneutics*. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, Fordham University Press (2015): 15-56.

Kim, Meeri. "What You're Seeing Right Now Is a Composite of Images Past and Present, Researchers Find." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 5 Apr. 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-youre-seeing-right-now-is-a-composite-of-images-past-and-present-researchers-find/2014/04/05/acc2f38-bc32-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/what-youre-seeing-right-now-is-a-composite-of-images-past-and-present-researchers-find/2014/04/05/acc2f38-bc32-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245_story.html).

Lapierre, Christopher. "Le fondement imaginaire du perçu chez Merleau-Ponty et Grimaldi", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2015, pp. 353-376.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *L'oeil et l'esprit*. Gallimard, 1964.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Le visible et l'invisible: suivi de notes de travail*. Gallimard, 1979.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Phénoménologie de la perception (1945)." *Librairie Gallimard, Paris* (1976).

Noë, Alva. *Action in perception*. MIT press, 2004.

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké. *Visualizing the body: Western theories and African subjects*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005.

Sartre, Jean Paul. "L'imaginaire Psychologie Phénoménologique de L'Imagination." (1940).

Searle, John. "The Intentionality of Perception." *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1983): 33-78.

Senghor, Leopold Sedar. *On African socialism*. (1964)

Strawson, Peter F. "Imagination and perception." (1982).