

Beyond Spatial Orientation

Merleau-Ponty's Account of Perspective



Perspectival Variation:

“To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse.” (Merleau-Ponty, *CD* 14)

For Merleau-Ponty:

- Perception is **not** “two-dimensional” — instead, perception of the object itself is characterized by and reliant upon the dynamicism of perspectival variation.
- Perspectival variation does **not** consist of the combination of discrete perspectival moments by the understanding.
- Perspectival variation **is** a continuous exploration of the *horizontal structure* of the object, and thus of the object itself.

SPATIAL ORIENTATION AND NORMATIVITY

- Objects' horizontal structures are normatively ordered.
- This normativity is *felt* as a *tension* which draws us to interact with them in this way rather than that.
- This tension prescribes what perspectival orientations we *should* take up towards the object ("maximum visibility" or "maximal grip").
- Perception is *ambiguous*, and we could never have every perspective on the object at once, even in the "maximal grip" state.
- Perspectival variation helps us familiarize ourselves with the object better, by exploring the object's horizontal structure further.



A RICHER PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is not only spatial, or even spatio-temporal. It is also personal, socio-historical, cultural, political, etc.:

“Perceptual life... is underpinned by an ‘intentional arc’ that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships” (Merleau-Ponty, *PoP* 137).

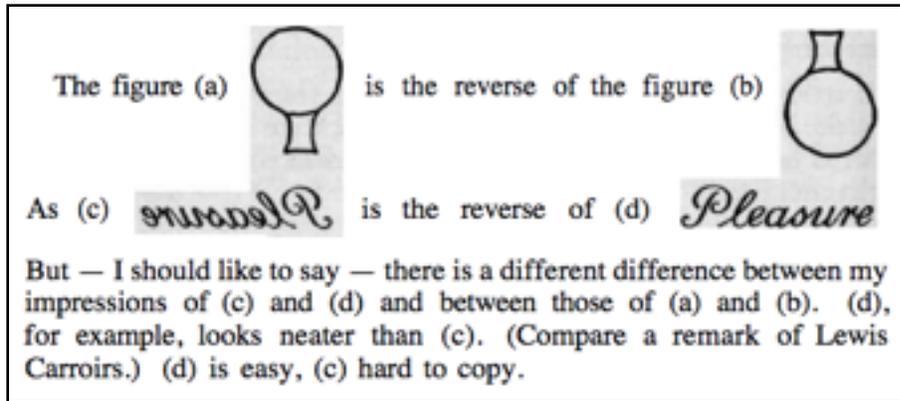


Fig 1 —
Wittgenstein,
Philosophical
Investigations, II xi.

- Perceptual perspective involves the perceiver's cultural, socio-historical, personal, political, etc. situatedness.
- The horizontal structure of an object includes *all possible perspectives* on the object.
- The horizontal structure of an object includes perspectives I could never possibly have myself, because of differences among perceivers' cultural/socio-historical/personal/political/etc. situations.

CONCLUDING POINTS:

1. Just as our perspective is always limited spatially, so too is it limited socio-historically.
2. Just as the object itself is really present to us by means of our particular spatial perspective, so too is it really present to us through our particular socio-historical perspective.
3. Just as the object's horizontal structure includes a normative component that recommends certain spatial orientations over others, similarly there are socio-historical perspectives that are better than others for perceiving certain aspects of the world.
4. Therefore, there are ways the world *really is* that I perhaps do not have the best view on, or that I will never actually see, because of my particular socio-historical perspective.