

**“The Problem of Perception and Everyday Illusion
in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*”**

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*“To perceive is suddenly to commit to an entire future of experiences in a present
that never, strictly speaking, guarantees that future.”*

Merleau-Ponty appears to think that we are in some kind of immediate perceptual contact with the world. If this is so, he must find a way to account for illusion. Such an account must meet at least two requirements:

1. It must explain how illusions could arise, apparently despite our direct perceptual engagement with the world, and
2. It must still be able to effectively distinguish illusory perception from veridical.

Merleau-Ponty has an account of illusion that meets (1) by showing that everyday illusions are evidence for rather than against our direct engagement with the world, and that meets (2) insofar as this distinction actually plays a central role in Merleau-Ponty’s argument in response to (1). I will argue that Merleau-Ponty has a view in which we are in direct contact with the world in perception, while also maintaining that illusion is not only reconcilable with but in fact an essential feature of genuine perception.

I. What are “everyday illusions”?

- A. Usual definition of “illusion” too broad in some respects, too narrow in others
- B. “Illusion”: a “mistake” made in response to a solicitation from the world
- C. Perceptual ambiguity: “illusory” or “veridical” status only established through further engagement, never once-and-for-all with absolute certainty

II. The Stone on the Path (e.g.)

- A. Perceptual experience involves an “invitation” to “see more”
- B. Ensuing experiences can reveal prior ones as illusory; perception as “self-correcting”
- C. Illusory and veridical perception “make use of the same belief in the world”

III. Openness to the World

- A. “Openness to the world” allows our perceptions to be guided by real things; makes us vulnerable to “perceptual deception”
- B. Perception better characterized in terms of “responsiveness” rather than “veridicality”
- C. “There is an absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any particular thing.”

IV. Conclusion

- Illusions arise *because of* our direct perceptual engagement with the world: it is part of what it is to be open to the world that we can be deceived in illusion.
- Illusion is distinct from veridical perception *qua* that which is corrected.

Insofar as it reveals our perceptual responsiveness to the world through openness to correction, illusion is actually a key feature for Merleau-Ponty's account of our direct engagement with the world.

Key Quotations*

“To say that, in consciousness, appearance and reality are one, or to say that they are separated, is to render impossible the consciousness of anything, even as appearance.” (310)

“In the very moment of illusion, this correction was presented to me as possible because the illusion itself makes use of the same belief in the world.” (311)

“It is essential for the thing and for the world to be presented as “open,” to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, and to promise us always “something more to see.”” (348)

“It is this opening to the world that makes perceptual truth possible... and permits us “to cross out” the preceding illusion, to hold it to be null and void.” (311)

“There is an absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any particular thing.” (311)

“Each perception, although always potentially “crossed out” and pushed over to the realm of illusions, only disappears in order to leave a place for another perception that corrects it. Of course, each thing can, *apres coup*, appear uncertain, but at least it is certain for us that there are things, that is, that there is a world. To wonder if the world is real is to fail to understand what one is saying, since the world is not a sum of things that one could always cast into doubt, but precisely the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn.” (360)

*All references are to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, Routledge 2012. Epigraph can be found on pg. 311.