

“Positive Ambiguity” and Merleau-Pontyan Realism

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that “the nature of the perceived is to tolerate ambiguity,” and that “we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 7-11). This is a remarkable claim. Typically, philosophers have taken perceptual ambiguity, or the fact that our perceptual experiences are sometimes vague, confused, or erroneous, to undermine our intuitive sense that perception puts us into direct contact with the real world. Since perception is sometimes in error, they reason, what we experience must be something fundamentally different from the world itself. Our perception of the world is thus thought to be mediated by some kind of mental content: we perceive a representation *of* the world, not the world itself.

Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, seems to think that perception puts us into a special kind of “communion” or “symbiosis” with the world itself – a view which several commentators have characterized as a variety of “direct realism,” or the view that we have an immediate relation to the world in experience (e.g. Kelly 2007, Taylor 2005). However, it is not so clear that Merleau-Ponty should be characterized this way: other commentators have resisted the notion (e.g. Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, Carman 2008), and Merleau-Ponty himself explicitly argues against the idea of some determinate, mind-independent substance that grounds our perceptual experiences. Yet, Merleau-Ponty also clearly wants to resist the transcendental idealist’s inclination to ground experience in a constituting subject, or indeed, any attempt at all to mediate perceptual experience through some kind of mental content.

In this paper, I will investigate how Merleau-Ponty’s account of “positive ambiguity” can shed light on the broader question concerning Merleau-Ponty’s realism. First, I will provide a brief analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s account of illusion. This analysis shows that ambiguous or even non-veridical perceptual experiences are not only reconcilable with, but in fact essential to, a direct relation to a concretely real external world. For Merleau-Ponty, that our perceptions are sometimes ambiguous, confused, or erroneous is only to be expected in an interaction with a genuine external world that extends beyond our individual subjective experience. I will also argue that, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, ambiguous or even non-veridical experiences should nonetheless be considered genuine (or “positive”) perceptions of the world, however confused or liminal. For Merleau-Ponty, these experiences involve a certain departure from the normative or “optimal” experience of the object. However, the “tension” created through that departure is essential to such experiences; through this tension, the ambiguous or non-veridical experience still leads us back to the object itself. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty’s account of positive ambiguity supports conceiving of him as a direct realist, of a particular and highly unique sort. I will conclude with some comments on the possible consequences of Merleau-Ponty’s view for contemporary cognitive scientific approaches to ambiguous perceptual experiences, and for the project of “naturalizing” phenomenology more generally.