

Perception Reconsidered

*"But even the places in which I find myself are never completely given to me; the things I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects. Thus, there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given. And these two elements of perception are not, properly speaking, contradictory."*¹

*"...the senses are the organs through which the live creature participates directly in the on-goings of the world about... In this participation, the varied wonder and splendor of this world are made actual..."*²

*"It is in reference to our own body that we locate exterior objects, and the only special relations of these objects that we can picture to ourselves are their relations with our body. It is our body that serves us, so to speak, as a system of axes of co-ordinates."*³

The authors of the above quotes clearly recognized that perception is not merely our *window on the world* but is the fundamental source of knowledge and human experience, and that this *window* is, through our sense organs, centered around our bodies. Therefore, expanding our understanding of perception beyond the elementary (or common) level provides the opportunity for both increased self-understanding and enhancing our worldview.

¹ Merleau-Ponty 1964, 16.

² John Dewey (1934), *Art as Experience*, (NY, Penguin Books, 2005), 22.

³ Poincaré 1918, 100.

As stated above, perception is immanent because it is presented to us in a very personal way and that which we perceive is believed to have a concrete reality (concrecence). On the other hand, perception is transcendental because beyond the reality of that perceived, the thing-in-itself remains unknown and, perhaps, unknowable. That is, our perception is always incomplete; we only have phenomenological knowledge of objects and events. Even if we consider this knowledge empirical or scientific, we cannot pass beyond the phenomena except by speculative inference and extrapolation.

The notion that through perception we live reality as experienced is another way of stating the primacy of perception. Perception involves a transcendence of the physical percepts into the mental realm of ideas, concepts, and thoughts. When an object or event is committed to our perceptual storehouse, the physical object is not directly changed, but its phenomenological image is integrated into the Mind where it is wedged in with a myriad of other mental occupants.⁴

Contrary to other forms of life, where the focus is on sustenance, reproduction, and survival in an environment, human activities include contemplating the utility of things and events, as well as seeking meanings for these things and events. That is, the human mind reflects upon itself (self-reflexive) and ponders the world in a general way. As far as we know, or are capable of knowing, only humans pursue endeavors that seek the function and meaning (or purpose) behind the phenomena.

⁴ Herein *Mind* (with upper case M) is a reference to all psychophysical components, including the subconscious, and the non-physical aspects of consciousness, while *mind* (with lower case m) refers primarily to common cognitive functions such as awareness.

Although there is, in general, consensus concerning our common perception of objects and events, there is always some differentiation as well. Each of us has a different understanding and interpretation of perceived objects and events that reflect our personal preferences, experiences, and general inclinations. For example, when I first see a novel table, without conscious effort, I immediately correlate this table with personal encounters of other tables. These prior encounters with other tables have through a process of synthesis and abstraction developed into a generic image of table, which might well be called a conceptual notion of *table-hood* and through this process each of us has a different notion of this table-hood. For example, a furniture artisan will *see* the table in a more distinctive way than most of us.

That is, perception has common elements based on consensual intersubjective agreements by society at large, as well as personal elements unique to the individual. Put another way, perception has an interpretive aspect based on interest, education, inclination, and so on. Even science is only an extension of what we do in our everyday lives. What makes science different is the use of formal procedures and rules to extend this synthesis and make it more precise. In everyday situations, affirmation of the table as a table is immediate and easily understood, while for the objectives of scientific study, determination and affirmation, are more drawn out and more precise.

In summary, perception is not just a common flow of objects and events. The perception of an object is individualized, with each person having an individual version of the object perceived. To say that the astronomer sees the moon more accurately than a Bushman of the Kalahari is not a statement of value, but a statement about a technological viewpoint versus what might be called a natural or spiritual viewpoint.