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# Merleau-Ponty on Style as the Key to Perceptual Presence and Constancy

SAMANTHA MATHERNE \*

**ABSTRACT** In recent discussions of two important issues in the philosophy of perception, viz. the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy, Merleau-Ponty's ideas have been garnering attention thanks to the work of Sean Kelly and Alva Noë. Although both Kelly's normative approach and Noë's enactive approach highlight important aspects of Merleau-Ponty's view, I argue that neither does full justice to it because they overlook the central role that style plays in his solution to these problems. I show that a closer look at the *Phenomenology* and several other texts from this period reveals that, on Merleau-Ponty's account, we are able to perceive the absent features of objects as present, constant properties, and constant objects because we recognize that the objects we perceive have a unique style that persists through and unifies all their appearances.

**KEYWORDS** Merleau-Ponty, perception, style, perceptual presence, perceptual constancy, phenomenology

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT DISCUSSIONS OF TWO important issues in the philosophy of perception, viz. the problem of perceptual presence and the problem of perceptual constancy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas have received something of a second life thanks to the work of Sean Kelly and Alva Noë.<sup>1</sup> The problem of perceptual presence stems from questions related to how it is possible for us to perceive features of objects that are not directly given to our embodied point of view, for example, in amodal perception when I perceive a house as having a back side even though I am looking at its front side.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the problem of perceptual constancy concerns our

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<sup>1</sup>See Kelly, "What Do We See," "Seeing Things," "The Normative Nature of Perceptual Experience"; Noë, *Action in Perception*, and *Varieties of Presence*.

<sup>2</sup>This problem has received more attention recently on account of Noë's emphasis on it in *Action in Perception* and *Varieties of Presence*. In his words, this problem concerns explaining how it is that "We

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ability to perceive something as constant in spite of varying perspectives and perceptual conditions. This problem is often construed in terms of our ability to perceive properties as constant in spite of varying conditions, for example, our ability to perceive a wall as white in uneven lighting conditions or a Frisbee as circular when seen from an oblique angle. However, the problem also concerns our ability to perceive an object with its various properties as constant in spite of the fluctuating perceptions we have of it, for example, we can perceive a green, rectangular, two-inch thick book as constant in spite of the fluctuating perceptions we have of it, say, in the morning, afternoon, and evening.<sup>3</sup> I will refer to these as the problems of property constancy and object constancy respectively.

In their attempts to deal with these problems, both Kelly and Noë have regarded Merleau-Ponty's work as a promising resource. Though I will have more to say about both of these views below, roughly, Kelly defends a normative account of perceptual presence and constancy, which develops Merleau-Ponty's idea that perception involves normative sensitivity to how objects or properties ought to look when perceived optimally and how our current perceptions deviate from that norm. Meanwhile, Noë's enactive account draws on Merleau-Ponty's claims about bodily knowledge and argues that it is in virtue of us having sensorimotor knowledge of how objects and properties show up in varying perceptual conditions that presence and constancy become possible.

Although both Kelly and Noë highlight important aspects of Merleau-Ponty's view, I argue that neither does full justice to his view because they overlook the central role that 'style' plays in his solution to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy. As a closer look at the *Phenomenology* and several other texts from this period reveals, on Merleau-Ponty's account, it is because we recognize that the objects we perceive have a distinctive style that persists through and unifies all their appearances that we are able to perceive the absent features of an object as present, constant properties, and constant objects. Though appealing to an aesthetic notion in this context may at first strike us as unusual, I show that Merleau-Ponty uses it as the foundation of a sophisticated theory of perceptual presence and constancy, which is able to account for the unity of both the object and of our experience in these perceptual phenomena.

Moreover, I submit that my interpretation has several advantages over Kelly's and Noë's approaches. First, with respect to Kelly's interpretation, he claims that while Merleau-Ponty explicitly defends a promising account of property constancy, when

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have a sense of the presence of that which, strictly speaking, we do not perceive" (*Action in Perception*, 60). For other recent general formulations of the problem of perceptual presence, see Alan Thomas, "Perceptual Presence and the Productive Imagination"; and Amy Kind, "Imaginative Presence."

<sup>3</sup>Though recent philosophical literature has tended to focus on property constancy (see, e.g. Susanna Schellenberg, "The Situation-Dependency of Perception," and Jonathan Cohen, "Perceptual Constancy"), Merleau-Ponty, and Kelly following him in "What Do We See" and "Seeing Things," distinguishes between the constancy of properties and the constancy of what he calls the 'real thing' or what we would call an 'object.' On Merleau-Ponty's view, object constancy is not just a matter of the constancy of, say, the shape of an object, but rather of the object as a whole with its various properties. That is why, as we shall see below, he devotes Section A of "The Thing" chapter ("Perceptual Constants") to issues of property constancy, e.g. size, color, weight, etc., and Part B ("The Thing or the Real") to issues of object constancy.

it comes to object constancy and perceptual presence he “falters” and “didn’t quite get his own view right” (“Seeing Things,” 94, 76). For this reason, Kelly devotes much of his interpretation to a careful reconstruction of what Merleau-Ponty should have said with regard to these issues. Given the importance of perceptual presence and object constancy in any account of perception, it seems like a serious failing on Merleau-Ponty’s part not to have offered the view he should have; however, in what follows, I argue that we do not need to fault him on this count. To the contrary, by attending to Merleau-Ponty’s use of style, my interpretation uncovers the coherent and compelling account of presence and object constancy that he explicitly defends. Second, Susanna Schellenberg argues that both Kelly’s and Noë’s accounts face what she calls the “unification problem,” which is a problem that concerns how, given the flux of appearances and perceptions, we are able to have a unified experience of a unified object (“Action and Self-Location,” 609–10). If we think Kelly’s and Noë’s views are extensions of Merleau-Ponty’s view, then we may be tempted to think his view faces this problem as well. However, I hope to demonstrate that one of the strengths of Merleau-Ponty’s style-based approach precisely is its ability to deal with the unification problem, for the appeal to style provides a way to accommodate the unity of both the object and our experience.

In order to develop my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s style-based account of perceptual presence and constancy, I begin, in section 2, with a discussion of Kelly’s normative interpretation. I then turn to Noë’s enactive interpretation in section 3, and address Schellenberg’s unification problem in section 4. In section 5, I present my alternative interpretation, which hinges on two theses: ‘the style thesis’ and ‘the style recognition thesis.’ Next, in section 6, I examine how these two theses provide the groundwork for Merleau-Ponty’s account of perceptual presence and constancy so as to avoid the unification problem and how this solution differs from the one that Kelly and Noë attribute to him. I conclude, in section 7, with a discussion of the merits of Merleau-Ponty’s strategy of employing the aesthetic notion of style to solve problems in ordinary perception.

## 2. KELLY’S NORMATIVE INTERPRETATION OF MERLEAU-PONTY

Though both Kelly and Noë draw on themes in Merleau-Ponty in order to build their accounts of presence and constancy, Kelly, unlike Noë, presents his account as a careful interpretation of Merleau-Ponty and, as such, his work serves as a helpful starting point. It is in particular in his article, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” that Kelly offers an extended analysis of the details of Merleau-Ponty’s position. Thus, in this section, I want to concentrate on this piece, both discussing its content and raising objections to it.

### *2.1. Kelly and “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty”*

At the heart of Kelly’s interpretation is an emphasis on what he takes to be two central themes in Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception: indeterminacy and normativity. Beginning with indeterminacy, Kelly argues that, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, in order to account for the presence of what is absent or the perception of

constants, we must in the first place recognize that perception is not a wholly determinate affair. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's claims early in the *Phenomenology* that "there is an *indeterminate vision*, a *vision of something or other* [vision de je ne sais quoi]" (*PdP* 28/*PhP* 6) and that "We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (*PdP* 28/*PhP* 7), Kelly claims that, for Merleau-Ponty, perception involves an awareness of things that are indeterminately present ("Seeing Things," 80).<sup>4</sup> Kelly identifies Merleau-Ponty's 'canonical' example of indeterminate visual presence as the presence of a background behind a figure ("Seeing Things," 82). As I stare at the bowl of fruit on my table, for example, even though I have no determinate perception of the other objects in my perceptual field, like the couch, the piano, and the window, they are, on this view, nevertheless perceptually present to me in an indeterminate way. Though this is an example of the indeterminate presence of the background, Kelly argues that it generalizes to cases of perceptual presence and constancy as well.

Yet, in order to fully cash out what this indeterminacy amounts to, Kelly claims that Merleau-Ponty appeals to the notion of normativity: something is indeterminately present in my perception if it plays a normative role in it. According to Kelly, this idea is manifest in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of our sensitivity to the optimal context for perceiving something, for example, the optimal lighting conditions in or the optimal distance from which to perceive the object. As Merleau-Ponty puts the point:

For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen—an orientation through which it presents more of itself—beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward a maximum of visibility. (*PdP* 355/*PhP* 315–16; cf. "Seeing Things," 85)

On Kelly's reading, this optimal context serves as a norm we are sensitive to in perception: we are aware of how our current perceptual situation "deviates" from this norm and we "tend toward" it, that is, we are drawn to move our bodies or change our situation in order to have a better perception of the object (see, e.g. "Seeing Things," 85). Even though we do not have a determinate grasp of what this context is, nevertheless it is indeterminately present in our perception, as something that normatively guides it.

On Kelly's interpretation, Merleau-Ponty, in turn, uses this analysis of the norm involved in the optimal perceptual context to explicate property constancy. In particular, Kelly suggests that, for Merleau-Ponty, the constant property is defined in terms of the normative context: the constant property is the one that would be revealed in the optimal context, for example, a constant color is the color as it would be revealed in the optimal lighting context (see "Seeing Things," 86). However, Kelly claims that the constant property is not one we have a determinate experience of; rather, it is something that is present in the same indeterminate, normative way that the optimal context is. In the case of color, for example, Kelly highlights Merleau-Ponty's remark that "The real color remains beneath the

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<sup>4</sup>Citations to *Phenomenology of Perception* will be to the original French (*PdP*) pagination/English (*PhP*) pagination.

appearances just as the background continues beneath the figure, that is, not as a quality that is seen or conceived, but rather as a non-sensorial presence” (*PdP* 359/*PhP* 319; cf. “Seeing Things,” 87). On Kelly’s reading, what it means for the real color to be experienced like the background beneath the figure is for it to be present indeterminately as a norm from which we experience our current perceptions deviating. For this reason, Kelly suggests that, for Merleau-Ponty, a constant property is itself a norm: it is the “maximally articulate norm against which every particular presentation is felt to deviate” (“Seeing Things,” 98). On Kelly’s view, then, there are multiple norms that guide us in perception. Whereas the optimal context is a norm that attunes us to how our current perceptual context deviates from the optimal one, the constant property is a norm that enables us to be sensitive to how the property as it presents itself here and now deviates from the property as it would be revealed in the optimal context.

Drawing on this normative analysis, Kelly suggests that Merleau-Ponty solves the problem of property constancy as follows. Constant properties are norms that reflect how that property would be perceived in the optimal context, and we are able to perceive that property as constant because we are sensitive to how our current perceptions deviate from that norm. For example, my perception of this book as a constant red involves me being normatively sensitive to how my current perception of its red in these uneven lighting conditions deviates from how that red would reveal itself in optimal lighting conditions. So too for other constant properties, like shape or size, our awareness of them involves not a determinate perception of them, but rather an indeterminate awareness of them as norms that our current perceptions deviate from.

Yet, although Kelly thinks Merleau-Ponty is clear about this point in the case of property constancy, he argues that when it comes to object constancy and perceptual presence, “Merleau-Ponty didn’t quite get his own view right” (“Seeing Things,” 76). According to Kelly, Merleau-Ponty failed to argue for the idea that a constant object is the norm from which we experience our current perceptions to be deviating: “Everything he says leads him to this view. Yet, amazingly, I can find no place where he states it explicitly” (“Seeing Things,” 95). In order to make up for this lacuna in Merleau-Ponty’s account, Kelly offers a reconstruction of what he thinks Merleau-Ponty’s view should have been. To this end, Kelly draws on both Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of property constancy and the following passage from the Introduction to Part One of the *Phenomenology*. I shall call this passage the ‘seeing things passage,’ and, given its centrality for Kelly, I quote it at length:

To see is to enter into a universe of beings that *show themselves*. . . . In other words, to see an object is to come to inhabit it and to thereby grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn towards this object. And yet, to the extent that I also see those things, they remain places open to my gaze and, being virtually situated in them, I already perceive the central object of my present vision from different angles. Each object, then, is a mirror to all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can “see.” The back of my lamp is merely the face that it “shows” to the fireplace. Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence.

. . . Thus, our formula above must be modified: the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house seen from everywhere. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden. (*PdP* 96–97/*PhP* 70–71; cf. “Seeing Things,” 76, 91)

There are several key ideas in this passage that Kelly draws on to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s view. To begin, Kelly uses the idea of the ‘view from everywhere’ in this passage to elucidate the optimal context for perceiving a constant object. The view from everywhere is the view that is constituted by all the other objects that “see” the central object, for example, the view from everywhere on the lamp is the view that the fireplace, walls, and table collectively have of it. Though Kelly notes that this is not a view any embodied perceiver could ever have, he suggests it nevertheless serves as the norm that guides us in our perception of the object: it represents the context that would give us a “*maximum grip*” on the object, which we experience our current context to deviate from (“Seeing Things,” 95).

It is this normative gloss on the view from everywhere that Kelly thinks can be marshaled in order to fill in Merleau-Ponty’s account of objective constancy and perceptual presence. With regard to object constancy, Kelly argues that the constant object is defined in terms of the view from everywhere, that is, it is the object as it would be revealed to this view. However, this constant object is not something we have a determinate experience of; rather, we experience it indeterminately, as a norm: “the real thing . . . is the *norm* from which I experience the object as presented in my current perspective to be deviating” (“Seeing Things,” 95). This, in turn, means that our ability to perceive an object as constant depends on our normative awareness of how our current perceptions of the object deviate from how the object would reveal itself to the view from everywhere.

Meanwhile, with respect to perceptual presence, Kelly emphasizes the claim in Merleau-Ponty’s seeing things passage that seeing a focal object involves “already perceiving” that object from the vantage point of the surrounding objects, each of which represents a “place open to my gaze” that I can be “virtually situated in.” According to Kelly, this means that in virtue of being sensitive to the view from everywhere, I already perceive the hidden backside of an object because I am virtually lodged in the point of view of the object that “sees” its backside (“Seeing Things,” 99). On Kelly’s interpretation, we are virtually lodged in the alternative point of view by means of the motor intentionality of our body. This motor intentionality is something he describes as a “kind of bodily readiness” to engage with the absent features of the object (“Seeing Things,” 100). The absent side of an object can thus be present in perception, albeit in an indeterminate way due to us being intentionally directed towards it through our bodies.

In sum, on Kelly’s interpretation, the key to understanding Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy is to appreciate the positive role that indeterminacy and normativity play in our perception. While Kelly takes Merleau-Ponty to have been clear about this in the case of property constancy, he claims that he faltered in the case of object constancy and perceptual presence. Kelly takes this to be the case because he thinks Merleau-Ponty failed to argue explicitly that these phenomena are grounded in



our awareness of how our current perceptions deviate from the constant object, defined as the norm constituted by the view from everywhere.

### 2.2. *Objections to Kelly's Interpretation*

Although I think Kelly's interpretation nicely highlights the role that indeterminacy, normativity, and motor intentionality play in Merleau-Ponty's view, there are two reasons to be hesitant about attributing to Merleau-Ponty an account of constancy and presence that relies on the seeing things passage and the view from everywhere. The first reason relates to a textual concern that the seeing things passage is not representative of Merleau-Ponty's own view, and the second relates to the worry that, by focusing on the seeing things passage, we overlook the style-based account of object constancy and perceptual presence that Merleau-Ponty explicitly defends.

To begin, while the seeing things passage serves as the linchpin of Kelly's reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's view, it is not entirely clear that this passage reflects the latter's own position. As readers familiar with his style are aware, not every passage Merleau-Ponty writes is in his own voice; rather, he often proceeds by first presenting the 'empiricist' and 'intellectualist' positions he is critical of on their own terms, then offering objections to these positions, and only subsequently defending his own view.<sup>5</sup> A closer look at the context of the seeing things passage raises the concern that Merleau-Ponty is not there offering his own view, but rather a view he wishes to oppose.

The seeing things passage occurs in the brief Introduction to Part One, "The Body" (*PdP* 95–100/*PhP* 69–74), and Merleau-Ponty uses this text to set up a central question relating to perception, viz. how can perception "com[e] about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective" (*PdP* 95/*PhP* 69). In other words, how can we explain the fact that, although perspective limits our perception, in perception we are nevertheless able to grasp objects that transcend that perspective? In order to begin exploring this question in the course of his Introduction, Merleau-Ponty considers two different approaches to perception that rely on the notions of the 'view from nowhere' and 'view from everywhere,' respectively. On the former view, which he attributes to Leibniz, an object is like a "*geometrical plan* that includes . . . all possible perspectives"; in which case, the proper perception of it is a non-perspectival one, like the one that God has "from nowhere" (*PdP* 95/*PhP* 69). However, Merleau-Ponty quickly dispenses with this view, arguing that it is flawed because it fails to take perspective into account: "To see is always to see from somewhere" (*PhP* 69/*PdP* 95).

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<sup>5</sup>Taking the opening paragraphs of "The Thing and the Natural World" (*PdP* 352–57/*PhP* 312–17) as but one example, in the second paragraph, Merleau-Ponty presents the empiricist view ("The psychologist will say") and then criticizes it halfway through that paragraph ("But this psychological reconstitution of objective size and form . . . takes for granted what was to be explained"). In the next paragraph, he presents the intellectualist view ("At first glance, there certainly seems to be a way of evading the question") and then criticizes this position in the fourth paragraph ("But have we truly overcome [the psychologist's problems]?"). It is only here that he begins to defend his own view (e.g. emphasizing the normativity of perception and the idea that any analysis of perceptual constancy must account for both the "phenomenon of the body and the phenomenon of the thing").



After making some preliminary remarks about the structure of perspective, he then takes up the alternative ‘view from everywhere’ that Kelly discusses:

our formula above must be modified: the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but rather the house seen from everywhere. The fully realized object is translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden. (*PdP* 97/*PhP* 71)

It can be tempting to follow Kelly in interpreting the seeing things passage as reflective of Merleau-Ponty’s own view because there are themes in it that seem to be ones Merleau-Ponty endorses, for example, the idea that the objects I perceive are “places open to my gaze” and that I am “virtually situated” in them. However, the last sentence should make us wary: the description of objects as “fully realized,” “translucent,” and as having “nothing hidden” seems to crystallize the objects of perception in a way that Merleau-Ponty resists. Consider, for example, his claim that

it is essential for the thing [i.e. the perceived object] . . . to be presented as “open.” . . . This is what is sometimes expressed when it is said that the thing . . . [is] mysterious. . . . We now understand why things . . . are not significations presented to the intelligence, but are rather opaque structures, and why their final sense remains foggy. (*PdP* 390/*PhP* 348–49)

Alternatively, consider his assertion that “It is essential that the thing, if it is to be a thing, have sides hidden from me” (*PdP* 436/*PhP* 396). In both passages, he suggests that it is of the essence of the things we perceive to be “open,” “mysterious,” “opaque,” “foggy,” and to have “sides hidden.” The seeing things passage, however, characterizes objects in a much more transparent and fixed way, which raises the worry that this passage does not reflect his view after all.

This suspicion, in fact, appears to be confirmed if we examine how Merleau-Ponty continues in the rest of the Introduction to Part One. For immediately after describing the view from everywhere,<sup>6</sup> he appears to object to it: “But again, my human gaze never *posits* more than one side of the object” (*PdP* 98/*PhP* 72). Merleau-Ponty then devotes the remainder of the Introduction to discussing why such a view is misguided. According to Merleau-Ponty, we arrive at the idea that objects are fully realized or fully posited as a result of a problematic type of thinking that he labels ‘objective thought.’<sup>7</sup> On his view, objective thought is the type of thought that defines objects as entities that exist in-themselves and subjects as entities that exist for-themselves, that is, have consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

As he presents this view in the Introduction to Part One, objective thought characterizes the object as an “absolute object” that possess all of its parts entirely independently from us:

<sup>6</sup>After the paragraph in which he presents the spatial version of the view from everywhere that Kelly emphasizes, Merleau-Ponty devotes the next paragraph to the temporal version of this view (*PdP* 97/*PhP* 71–72).

<sup>7</sup>The analytical table of contents indicates “Experience and objective thought” and “The problem of the body” as the two themes he addresses in this Introduction (*PdP* 532/*PhP* 1v).

<sup>8</sup>Here I am drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of objective thought as follows: “The consistent function of objective thought is to reduce all phenomena that attest to the union of the subject and the world, and to substitute for them the clear idea of the object as an *in-itself* and of the subject as a pure consciousness” (*PdP* 376/*PhP* 334).

The house has *its* water pipes, *its* foundation, and perhaps its cracks growing secretly in the thickness of the ceiling. We never see them, but it *has them*, together with its windows or chimneys that are visible for us. . . . Taken in itself . . . the object conceals nothing; it is fully spread out and its parts coexist while our gaze skims over them one by one. (*PdP* 98/*PhP* 72–73)

While this might seem innocuous, it becomes clear that he takes issue with this view because it falsifies our actual experience:

The positing of the object thus takes us beyond the limits of our actual experience, which throws itself against a foreign being such that, in the end, experience believes it draws from the object everything that experience itself teaches us. . . . Obsessed with being, and forgetting the perspectivism of my experience, I henceforth treat my experience as an object. (*PdP* 99/*PhP* 73)

As we see here, Merleau-Ponty thinks that this view of the object is mistaken because it encourages us to think that the object alone is responsible for our experience and to thus to ignore the contribution we make through our embodied perspective. And when we do take this perspective into account, Merleau-Ponty suggests, we find that instead of perceiving an “object in its fullness,” that is, as something fully realized, we perceive an object as something that is “incomplete and open” (*PdP* 98/*PhP* 72). In other words, he says what we expect he would say, on the basis of the passages cited above, about the object of perception being mysterious, opaque, partially hidden etc.

Yet, in addition to this problematic view of objects, Merleau-Ponty suggests in the Introduction that objective thought also encourages us to have a mistaken view of the subject of perception. He maintains that, in objective thought, the subject is conceived of as a type of consciousness that is capable of positing all the features of an object. And to illustrate this view of consciousness, he once again appeals to the idea of ‘seeing things,’ claiming that in order for consciousness to posit an absolute object, it must posit it through the view from everywhere:

if the objects that surround the house or inhabit it remained what they are in perceptual experience, that is, gazes limited to a specific perspective, then the house would not be posited as an autonomous being. Thus, the positing of a single object in the full sense of the word requires the composition [or co-positing] of all these experiences in a single polythetic act. (*PdP* 99/*PhP* 73)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty here treats the view from everywhere as a component of the problematic view of consciousness that is defended by objective thought. Moreover, he once again objects that this view causes us to neglect fundamental features of our lived experience. In particular, he claims that if we think of consciousness along these lines, then we neglect the role played by our body, by time, and by the world (*PdP* 99/*PhP* 74). He argues that, when we do this, we can no longer give an accurate analysis of consciousness as it figures in our lived experience: “the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness, since it congeals all of experience, as a seed crystal introduced into a solution causes it suddenly to crystallize” (*PdP* 100/*PhP* 74).

Summing up these criticisms, Merleau-Ponty begins the last paragraph of the Introduction by saying,

We cannot remain within this dilemma of understanding either nothing of the subject or nothing of the object. We must rediscover the origin of the object at the very core of our experience, we must describe the appearance of being, and we must come to understand how, paradoxically, there is *for-us* an *in-itself*. (*PdP* 100/*PhP* 74)

As I read the dialectic of the Introduction, then, what has happened is that Merleau-Ponty first presented the view from nowhere theory and pointed out the obvious problems with it. He then presented the view from everywhere theory, criticized it as symptomatic of objective thought, and arrives in the last paragraph at the conclusion that we need to come up with an alternative theory if we are going to do justice to the subject and object of perceptual experience; a task he undertakes in the ensuing chapters of the *Phenomenology*. If this reading is right, then the view from everywhere theory is not a view he endorses, but rather one whose shortcomings he intends his own view to overcome.

This, in turn, puts pressure on Kelly's interpretation to the extent that it draws on the seeing things passage. To be sure, Kelly's interpretation of the view from everywhere does not ground it in objective thought, but rather acknowledges the role that our bodies, indeterminacy, and normativity play in our experience of it; all themes that Merleau-Ponty is surely sympathetic to. Yet if the seeing things passage itself does not represent Merleau-Ponty's own view, then it seems we should be hesitant about relying heavily on it in order to reconstruct his position on presence and constancy.

One might respond to this worry with an alternative interpretation of the seeing things passage, according to which it is not the ideas expressed in the passage that Merleau-Ponty objects to, but rather how objective thought distorts those ideas. After all, Merleau-Ponty does claim that objective thought is "the result and the natural continuation" of our perceptual experience (*PdP* 100/*PhP* 74). Perhaps, then, he uses the seeing things passage to articulate genuine features of perceptual experience and the subsequent paragraphs in the Introduction to explain how objective thought distorts these features. However, given how the seeing things passage ends, viz. with a characterization of the object of perception as something that is fully realized, it seems to me that the passage is better read as offering a description of how objective thought treats such fully realized and posited objects, that is, as 'seen from everywhere.' What is more, as we saw in our discussion of objective thought's view of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty returns to the ideas from the seeing things passage in explaining how objects come to be fully posited, which, again, suggests that this passage does not represent his own position, but rather the 'view from everywhere' position he eschews. For these reasons, it seems we should remain hesitant in reconstructing Merleau-Ponty's account of constancy and presence on the basis of the seeing things passage.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Kelly's motivation for drawing on the seeing things passage in the first place stems from what he takes to be a gap in Merleau-Ponty's account with regard to object constancy and perceptual presence. However, and this brings me

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<sup>9</sup>Even if it is the case that there are themes in the seeing things passage that Merleau-Ponty endorses, in sect. 6.2, I argue that it still cannot serve as an adequate basis of his account of object constancy because it neglects the reality of the objects of perception.

to my second objection to Kelly's reading, it is not clear that Merleau-Ponty falters on this count. There are, in fact, three texts from this period in particular in which Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the issues of object constancy and perceptual presence: the chapter from the *Phenomenology* titled "The Thing and the Natural World" (pt. 2, ch. 3); his 1946 summary of the *Phenomenology* in "The Primacy of Perception"; and his 1952–53 summary of the *Phenomenology* in "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work."<sup>10</sup> If we concentrate on these texts, I believe that we find Merleau-Ponty explicitly defending a view of object constancy and perceptual presence that we risk overlooking if we focus, instead, on the seeing things passage.

To be sure, Kelly addresses "The Thing" chapter; however, he only analyzes the account of property constancy that Merleau-Ponty gives in Section A of this chapter:

- A. Perceptual Constants
  - i. Constancy of form and size
  - ii. Constancy of color: the "modes of appearance" of color and lighting
  - iii. Constancy of sounds, temperatures, and weights
  - iv. The constancy of tactile experiences and movement. (*PdP* 535/*PhP* lxiii)

Yet, although Section A is devoted to issues surrounding property constancy, towards the end of this section, Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that any account of property constancy is incomplete without an account of constant objects and the world:

The constancy of color is merely an abstract moment of the constancy of things, and the constancy of things is established upon the primordial consciousness of the world as the horizon of all our experience. (*PdP* 368/*PhP* 326)<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, Merleau-Ponty organizes the rest of the chapter as follows:

- A. The Thing or the Real . . .
  - i. The thing as norm of perception
  - ii. The existential unity of the thing
  - iii. The thing is not necessarily an object
  - iv. The real as the identity of all the givens among themselves, as the identity of the givens and their sense
  - v. The thing "prior to" man
- B. The Natural World . . .
- C. Verification through the Analysis of Hallucination. (*PdP* 535/*PhP* lxiii)

Section B thus emerges as a pivotal text in which Merleau-Ponty deals with object constancy, or what he calls the constancy of the "inter-sensory thing" (*PdP* 373/*PhP* 331). Indeed, this is why we find passages like the following in this section:

When I perceive a pebble, I am not explicitly conscious of . . . only having perspectival aspects of it, and yet this analysis, if I undertake it, does not surprise me. I knew

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<sup>10</sup>Merleau-Ponty delivered "The Primacy of Perception" to the Société française de philosophie in 1946, and then published it in 1947. "An Unpublished Text" was published in 1962, but given to Martial Gueroult at the time of Merleau-Ponty's candidacy for the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France around 1952–53.

<sup>11</sup>Though Kelly discusses this passage in "What Do We See," emphasizing the idea that constant properties are not isolated, but rather properties of a particular object (122), he does not discuss it in "Seeing Things."

silently that the total perception went through and made use of my gaze. . . . This is how it is true to say that the thing is constituted in a flow of subjective appearances. And nevertheless, I did not constitute it at the time, that is, I did not actively and through an inspection of the mind, posit the relations of all the sensory profiles among themselves. . . . That is what we expressed by saying that I perceive with my body. (*PdP* 382/*PhP* 340–41)

While I will have more to say about this passage below, the point to note for present purposes is that, in it, he attributes to himself an account of object constancy that is based on the idea that we perceive with our bodies. What is more, this is an account of object constancy that he conceives of as an alternative to the view that requires consciousness to posit all the perspectival appearances of the object. However, given that this view of positing consciousness is the one that he associates with objective thought and the view from everywhere in the Introduction to Part One, it appears that Merleau-Ponty intends his body-centric account of object constancy to contrast with the view from everywhere account described in the Introduction. Altogether, this indicates that “The Thing” chapter represents what he takes to be his most straightforward analysis of object constancy in the *Phenomenology* and, as such, we have reason to privilege this text over the seeing things passage in our attempts to understand his view.

Although “The Thing” chapter is his most comprehensive attempt to address object constancy, the two other texts, “The Primacy of Perception” and “An Unpublished Text,” are valuable insofar as in them Merleau-Ponty is able to distill the core of his view in a way that is perhaps even clearer than in the *Phenomenology*. In “The Primacy of Perception,” Merleau-Ponty takes as his point of departure the problems of both perceptual presence<sup>12</sup> and perceptual constancy,<sup>13</sup> and he describes the solution to these two problems as follows:

The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them. This subject, which takes a point of view, is my body. . . . The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given *style*, which defines the object in question. (*PrP* 16, emphasis added)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes his familiar idea that perception depends on the embodied subject; however, he also makes the less familiar point that the perceived thing (the constant object) is defined by a style, which accounts for its unity. He employs a similar strategy in his discussion of property constancy and object constancy in “An Unpublished Text”:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>“If we consider an object which we perceive but one of whose sides we do not see . . . how should we describe the existence of . . . the nonvisible parts of present objects? Should we say, as psychologists have often done, that I *represent* to myself the sides of this lamp which are not seen?” (*PrP* 13).

<sup>13</sup>“These identifications presuppose that I recognize the true size of the object, quite different from that which appears to me from the point at which I am standing” (*PrP* 14). “In the same way it is not true that I deduce the true color of an object on the basis of the color of the setting or of the lighting” (*PrP* 15).

<sup>14</sup>In this portion of “An Unpublished Text,” Merleau-Ponty discusses how we have to understand the “structure of the perceived world” in a way that allows us to account for our perception of colors, spatial forms, spatial distances, and entire things without appealing to a “remote consciousness” (*PrP* 5).

We find that perceived things, unlike geometrical objects, are not bounded entities whose law of construction we possess *a priori*, but that they are open, inexhaustible systems which we recognize through a certain *style* of development, although we are never able, in principle, to explore them entirely, and even though they never give us more than profiles and perspectival views of themselves. (*PrP* 5–6, emphasis added)

To be sure, these passages raise all sorts of questions about how Merleau-Ponty conceives of style and how he uses it in this context. However, the fact that, in both of these texts, which are summaries of his view from the *Phenomenology*, he chooses to highlight the notion of style recommends that style warrants closer consideration as the key to the account of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy that he openly endorses. Indeed, by following up this clue and reading the account of object constancy in “The Thing” chapter in light of the notion of style, we can set aside the difficulties surrounding the seeing things passage and the serious charge that Merleau-Ponty did not get his own view right. Instead, we can concentrate on the subtle view of perceptual presence and constancy that he explicitly defends.

### 3. NOË’S ENACTIVE INTERPRETATION OF MERLEAU-PONTY

Before we turn directly to Merleau-Ponty’s view of perceptual presence and constancy, however, we should consider Noë’s enactive interpretation. Though Noë’s enactive view is no less influential than Kelly’s normative approach for how many scholars understand Merleau-Ponty, given that he does not present his enactive approach as an in-depth reading of Merleau-Ponty, but rather orients his own view by some of Merleau-Ponty’s basic ideas, my treatment of Noë will be briefer than my treatment of Kelly.<sup>15</sup>

For his part, Noë is critical of Kelly’s normative approach and offers several objections to it, one of which we shall consider here.<sup>16</sup> According to Noë, Kelly’s analysis of our normative relation to our perceptual context is problematic because in order to have a sense of whether we are perceiving optimally or sub-optimally,

<sup>15</sup>Rather than offering textual analysis, Noë often uses quotes from Merleau-Ponty as epigraphs that indicate general themes that he develops in his own enactive approach. See *Action in Perception*, 1, 35.

<sup>16</sup>The other two objections Noë offers concern the issue of apparent properties, i.e. whether perception involves us being aware of what Schellenberg, in “The Situation-Dependency of Perception,” calls ‘situation-dependent’ properties and Noë, in *Action in Perception*, calls ‘perspectival-’ or ‘P-’ properties, which are relational, mind-independent properties that are determined by the object’s constant properties and the perceptual conditions in which those properties manifest. Whereas Noë maintains that in perception we are aware of both apparent and constant properties, e.g. a circle seen obliquely will look both elliptical and circular, Kelly (e.g. “Content and Constancy”) claims that when we are engaged in perception, we are not aware of apparent properties and that it is only when we are disengaged or detached that we can become aware of them. Against Kelly, Noë objects that if we have reason to deny that we are aware of apparent properties when we are in the engaged attitude, then these reasons should extend to denying that we have normative awareness of our context as well (see *Varieties of Presence*, 53). However, he argues that if Kelly retains his commitment to the context playing a normative role, then he should acknowledge that apparent properties are involved in engaged perception because our awareness that our current perception is not optimal seems to require an awareness that how the object appears is not optimal (*Varieties of Presence*, 52–53). I confine my discussion of apparent properties to this and the following footnotes because, given the complexity of this issue, it is not one I can address fully in this paper.



we would have to be guided by a certain purpose, for example, a coin looks better up close if we are trying to read its date (*Varieties of Presence*, 53). However, Noë claims that “vision itself is not relative to certain purposes; seeing is all-purpose” (*Varieties of Presence*, 53). That is to say, with respect to vision, various perspectives on an object are equally viable because they all count as ways to see the object. For this reason, Noë thinks that Kelly is mistaken in claiming that when it comes to vision we can normatively privilege one context over another. So, by Noë’s lights, in order to explain perceptual presence and constancy we do not need to appeal to norms in the way that Kelly does.

On Noë’s alternative view, it is not Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the normativity of perception, but rather that of our bodily knowledge that explains how presence and constancy are possible.<sup>17</sup> This knowledge, which Noë refers to as ‘sensorimotor knowledge,’ is not a propositional form of knowledge, but rather a practical form of knowledge that depends on bodily skills and know-how.<sup>18</sup> What this knowledge involves, more specifically, is our implicit understanding of what Noë calls “sensorimotor contingencies,” that is, of how properties and objects appear in different ways depending on either our movement or that of the object (*Action in Perception*, 129). Noë, in turn, sees sensorimotor knowledge as the key to resolving the problems of perceptual presence and constancy. This is because, even though perception involves the immediate awareness of how an object appears in our current circumstances (i.e. an awareness of its apparent- or P-properties),<sup>19</sup> he claims that our sensorimotor knowledge makes hidden sides and constant properties “implicitly present” as something we could perceive were either we or the object to move in a certain way (*Action in Perception*, 129).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup>I return to a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of bodily knowledge in sect. 5.2.

<sup>18</sup>See Ken Pepper, “The Phenomenology of Sensor-Motor Understanding” for an analysis of how Merleau-Ponty’s view can fill in the gaps in Noë’s account of sensorimotor understanding.

<sup>19</sup>Whether Merleau-Ponty, like Noë endorses the idea that perception involves apparent properties is a contentious one. Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 228–29, for example, claims that Noë’s commitment to apparent properties departs from Merleau-Ponty’s view. On the one hand, I agree with Carman that Merleau-Ponty does not think that apparent properties show up phenomenologically. See, e.g. Merleau-Ponty’s claim that when we see a square from an angle, “we do not even see them according to their diamond-shaped perspectival appearance” (*PdP* 314/*PhP* 276), and that when someone perceives a die, “he does not perceive projections or even profiles of the die; rather, he sees the die itself sometimes from here, and sometimes from over there” (*PdP* 380–81/*PhP* 339). On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty suggests that even if during perception we are not aware of the apparent properties, we are not surprised when reflective analysis reveals them to us: “When I perceive a pebble, I am not explicitly conscious of... only having certain perspectival aspects of it, and yet this analysis, if I undertake it, does not surprise me. I knew silently that the total perception went through and made use of my gaze . . . . That is what we expressed by saying that I perceived with my body” (*PdP* 382/*PhP* 341). Here, Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying that we “knew silently” that our perception drew on the perspectival appearance of the object and that this, in fact, is part of the perspectival structure of the gaze. Ultimately, I take Merleau-Ponty’s considered position to be as follows. In perception, we are only phenomenologically aware of the constant object or property seen from our current point of view. However, our ability to perceive this constant object or constant property is the result of our body with its knowledge having taken into account what that perspectival appearance means in these circumstances. And it is because the apparent property is something our bodies take account of that we can become aware of in reflective analysis (e.g. through Husserlian reductions or perhaps the sort of Gestalt shift Kelly describes in “Content and Constancy,” 685).

<sup>20</sup>On Noë’s view, the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy are of a piece: they are both cases of “presence in absence,” i.e. cases in which we perceive something as present even



In color constancy, for example, Noë claims that, although we immediately perceive the apparent color of the object, for example, how it appears in the morning light, we at the same time perceive the constant color because we implicitly understand how the constant color would appear were our perceptual conditions to change. It is this practical grasp of the constant color that makes it present to us. Similarly, with shape constancy, Noë maintains that we are able to perceive a constant shape, for example, a Frisbee as circular, even if it appears elliptical from an oblique angle because we have a sense of how that circularity would appear were we or the object to move. Extending this analysis to perceptual presence, Noë argues that we can perceive a hidden side of an object as present because we know that if our bodies or the object moved, then we would perceive its hidden side. On Noë's view, then, the solution to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy depends on an appreciation of sensorimotor knowledge and this is an insight he sees at work in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

However, there is a further aspect of his view that is relevant to our analysis of Merleau-Ponty, and this concerns Noë's emphasis on the notion of style (*Varieties of Presence*, 45). According to Noë, although style is often thought of as a "low-prestige notion" that pertains to areas where people "have strong convictions but no good reasons," for example, fashion and pop music, he argues that it should instead be recognized as a "fundamental concept in terms of which to make sense of ourselves" (*Varieties of Presence*, 45). On Noë's analysis, style is "a way of doing something," and though we typically associate this with activities like dressing or painting, he widens the scope of style to include perceptual activities, like seeing or seeing a picture,<sup>21</sup> and more intellectual activities, like reading or having a conversation (*Varieties of Presence*, 45). On Noë's view, what all of these styles have in common is that they are distinctive ways in which we try to access the world and bring it into focus. As we shall see, even though Merleau-Ponty offers a different analysis of what style is, he, like Noë, is committed to the importance of this aesthetic notion for elucidating the nature of ordinary experience.

While I think Noë's enactive approach is helpful insofar as it points us towards the central role that bodily knowledge and style play in Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual presence and constancy, for reasons I shall discuss below (section 6.2), with respect to his dismissal of the normative dimension of perception, I think he parts ways from Merleau-Ponty. As I indicated above, I think one of the virtues of Kelly's account is that he rightly emphasizes the normative element at work in Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and I think that this normativity is something we should bear in mind, along with bodily knowledge and style, when we proceed to Merleau-Ponty's own view.

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though, strictly speaking, it is absent (*Action in Perception*, 128; see also *Varieties of Presence*, 58). Whereas the back side of an object is absent because it is hidden from view, the constant property of an object is absent in the sense that it is not it, but rather the apparent- or P- properties that are immediately or directly present to view.

<sup>21</sup>The style involved in seeing a picture is the topic of Noë, *Varieties of Presence*, ch. 5.

## 4. THE UNIFICATION PROBLEM

Having discussed both Kelly's normative and Noë's enactive approaches, we are now in a position to consider the objection that Schellenberg has raised for both of their views, which she calls the "unification problem."<sup>22</sup> At the most basic level, the unification problem concerns how it is that we are able to have a unified experience of a unified object given the flux of appearances and perceptions. This problem is one she takes to manifest on two levels: first, there is a question of how we can experience "the object as the same" across its various appearances, and, second, there is a question of how our perceptions can be integrated into a "single continuous experience" of that object. She argues that the former is a problem for Noë and the latter is a problem for Kelly.

With regard to Noë's account, Schellenberg claims that, although our sensorimotor knowledge can account for our knowledge of the way an object appears from different points of view, this does not yet explain how those appearances are linked together as appearances of the same object. On her view, though sensorimotor knowledge explains our ability to recognize a particular appearance as one of the possible ways in which an object can appear, this still leaves unanswered "how the appearances are recognized as of a single enduring object" ("Action and Self-Location," 609). So Schellenberg objects that Noë's account fails to explain "how these different appearances of the object are unified into the perception of the object" ("Action and Self-Location," 613). Meanwhile, with respect to Kelly she claims that, even if we acknowledge that the appearances are linked together in the view from everywhere, there is a further problem of how my various perceptions of the object are integrated into a continuous experience of it. Knowing that the appearances are linked together does not yet explain "how the different actual points of view are unified into the perception of the object" ("Action and Self-Location," 614). By Schellenberg's lights, then, both Noë's and Kelly's accounts fail to give a comprehensive account of the unity of both the object and our experience of the object in perception.

Given that Kelly and Noë draw their accounts in some sense from Merleau-Ponty, we might worry that his view also faces the unification problem. I take this to be a serious challenge, and one of my goals in what follows is to show that Merleau-Ponty's style-based account does not face this problem. It is with this in mind that we should now turn to the details of Merleau-Ponty's own solution to the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy.

## 5. MERLEAU-PONTY ON STYLE AND STYLE RECOGNITION

In what follows, I argue that the core of Merleau-Ponty's style-based account rests on two theses: the style thesis and the style recognition thesis. The first thesis is object-directed and, according to it, each object that we perceive has its own unique style that permeates it and gives unity to all its various parts. Meanwhile, the second thesis is subject-directed and, according to it, our perception of objects involve our bodies being able to recognize style and engage in perceptual synthesis on

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<sup>22</sup>See Schellenberg, "Action and Self-Location," 609–10, 613–14

this basis. After presenting these theses in this section, in section 6, I show how they ground Merleau-Ponty's solution to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy and do so in such a way that allows him to avoid the unification problem.

### 5.1. *The Style Thesis*

Merleau-Ponty employs the concept of style in a somewhat unusual way in this context. In other contexts, Merleau-Ponty uses style either as Noë does to refer to an activity or as an aesthetic concept that describes what unifies a number of objects, for example, the style of abstract expressionism. However, in this context, he uses style as an ontological concept that accounts for the unity of an individual object, for example, the style of Grace Kelly or *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>23</sup> As he says, for example, about the style of Paris:

each explicit perception in my journey through Paris—the cafés, the faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine—is cut out of the total being of Paris, and only serves to confirm a certain style or a certain sense [*sens*] of Paris. (*PdP* 332–33/*PhP* 294)

In a similar vein, he describes the style of an individual person as follows:

I recognize [an individual] in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character, because he conserves the same style in all that he says and in all of his behavior, even if he changes milieu or opinions. (*PdP* 384/*PhP* 342)

While we might be more familiar with the idea that Paris and an individual person have a unique style that permeates and unifies all of their various aspects, Merleau-Ponty broadens the application of this use of style to ordinary objects as well, for example, a piece of wood:

This piece of wood is neither an assemblage of colors and tactile givens, nor even their total *Gestalt*; rather, something like a woody essence emanates from it, these “sensible givens” modulate a certain theme or illustrate a certain style that wood is, and that establishes an horizon of sense around this piece of wood. (*PdP* 514/*PhP* 476)

This passage is particularly significant because, in it, we find Merleau-Ponty appealing to the notion of style as a corrective to an analysis of the unity of objects that he disagrees with. Here it is, in particular, the bundle theory, according to which objects just are bundles of properties, at which he is taking aim. Though this view has been attributed to Merleau-Ponty,<sup>24</sup> he is clear in this passage that

<sup>23</sup>While most commentators focus on how Merleau-Ponty uses the aesthetic notion of style to highlight the connection between artists, art works, and bodily behavior (see, e.g. Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, ch. 6; Jonathan Gilmore, “Merleau-Ponty: Between Philosophy and Art”; and Galen Johnson, “Introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Painting”), I follow Linda Singer, who emphasizes Merleau-Ponty’s use of style as both an aesthetic and an ontological concept in “Merleau-Ponty and the Concept of Style.”

<sup>24</sup>In *Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Perception*, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, for one, argues that Merleau-Ponty “endorses what is known as a bundle theory of objects—the view that objects are just bundles of properties” (123). On her reading, what leads Merleau-Ponty to this view is his rejection of the idea that there is some underlying substance that unifies the properties of an object together (see, e.g. his claim that “The unity of the thing . . . is not a substratum, an empty X, or a subject of inherence” (*PdP* 374/*PhP* 333)). Instead, she suggests that Merleau-Ponty thinks that the properties of an object are “internally related to one another” and the internal relations among the properties

the unity of the piece of wood does not come from it being an assemblage of properties, but rather is grounded in the wood's style.<sup>25</sup>

However, the bundle theory is not the only theory of the unity of an object that he thinks is inadequate; he also rejects efforts that ground the unity of the object in an underlying substrate and in an intellectual concept or idea. Targeting the former view, Merleau-Ponty argues that

The unity of the thing, beyond all of its congealed properties, is not a substratum, an empty X, or a subject of inherence, but rather that unique accent that is found in each one, that unique manner of existing of which its properties are a secondary expression. For example, the fragility, rigidity, transparency, and crystalline sound of a glass expresses a single manner of being. (*PdP* 374/*PhP* 333)

Instead of the there being some underlying substrate in which the properties of the object inhere, Merleau-Ponty claims that it is the thing's unique "manner of existing" that unifies those properties into a single whole. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we should think of a thing, like the glass, as an "existential unity" (*PdP* 374/*PhP* 333). Now, as it turns out, Merleau-Ponty has a number of ways to describe what accounts for the unity of an existential unity: in addition to the phrases 'manner of existing' and 'manner of being,' he describes it as the thing's "essence," "a priori," "sense" (*sens*), and "style."<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the picture of style that begins to emerge is that which binds a thing and all of its parts together as an existential unity. As we might make this point, a style is the principle of unity for an existential unity.

Furthermore, in order to argue against intellectualist views that treat an idea or concept as the source of a thing's unity, Merleau-Ponty argues that the principle of an existential unity is something that exists in and is inseparable from the thing itself. Making this point using the language of sense, he says,

The thing's sense inhabits it as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances. The sense of the ashtray (or at least its total and individual sense, such as is presented in perception) is not a certain ideal of the ashtray that coordinates the sensory appearances and that would only be accessible to the understanding. Rather, it animates the ashtray, and it is quite evidently embodied in it. (*PdP* 375/*PhP* 333)

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are what account for the object being "a single item" (124–25). Though I am sympathetic to the idea that there is an internal relation among the properties of the object, as I argue below, Merleau-Ponty identifies this relation as the one that holds between a style or "manner of existing" and the properties that are a "secondary expression" of that style (*PdP* 374/*PhP* 333). For Merleau-Ponty, an object is thus not just a bundle of properties; it is a whole in which its various parts are bound together by its unique style/manner of existing.

<sup>25</sup>As we might make this point, drawing on Edmund Husserl's mereology from Investigation III of the second volume of the *Logical Investigations*, Merleau-Ponty is committed to thinking of the objects we perceive as "pregnant" wholes, i.e. wholes in which the parts or "moments" are grounded in and dependent upon that whole in virtue of sharing a single "foundation." Applying this to Merleau-Ponty's view, the thing serves as the whole, its various properties and aspects are the moments, and the style is the foundation.

<sup>26</sup>He uses the terms 'essence,' 'a priori,' and 'sense' in the same paragraph just cited, e.g. "If a patient sees the devil, he also sees his odor, his flames, and his smoke, because the meaningful unity 'devil' is just this acrid, sulfurous, and burning essence. . . . Similarly, in the interaction of the things, each one is characterized by a sort of a priori that it observes in all its encounters with the outside. The thing's sense inhabits it as the soul inhabits the body" (*PdP* 375/*PhP* 333). Regarding style, he says, "Along with existence, I received a way of existing, or a style" (*PdP* 520/*PhP* 482).

So rather than treating the principle of unity as a concept that unifies the thing, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is something that inhabits and is embodied in the thing itself. The sort of inseparability he has in mind is something he thinks we are quite familiar with in our engagement with art:

A novel, a poem, a painting, and a piece of music are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact. (*PdP* 188/*PhP* 153)

For example, in order to properly grasp a work of art—say, Mahler’s Ninth Symphony—we recognize that no amount of reading or hearing about it second-hand will be adequate: its full meaning can be found only when we listen to the piece.<sup>27</sup> By Merleau-Ponty’s lights, however, this is the same sort of inseparability at work in ordinary objects; the ashtray and its sense are just as inseparable as Mahler’s Ninth and its sense. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty draws on the aesthetic notion of expression right after the ashtray example, claiming that

the thing accomplishes this miracle of expression: an interior is revealed on the outside, a signification that descends into the world and begins to exist there and that can only be fully understood by attempting to see it there, in its place. (*PdP* 375–76/*PhP* 333–34)

So, on Merleau-Ponty’s view of the unity of objects, contrary to bundle and substrate theories, objects have a style that unifies all their parts into an existential unity, and contrary to intellectualist theories, the principle of its unity is inseparable from the object itself.

There is, however, one further important point to make about the notion of style. As we see in the passage about the piece of wood, according to Merleau-Ponty, the style of a thing is something that opens up a “horizon of sense” around it (*PdP* 514/*PhP* 476).<sup>28</sup> As he describes this horizon in the passage from “The Primacy of Perception” we discussed earlier,

The perceived thing . . . is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question. (*PrP* 16)

The style of the object, then, is something that opens up a horizon in which the same object in virtue of its consistent style can be encountered from different perspectives. Though this may sound like the view from everywhere,<sup>29</sup> on Merleau-

<sup>27</sup>As he says, e.g. about Cézanne, “If I have never seen his paintings, then the analysis of Cézanne’s oeuvre leaves me the choice between several possible Cézanne’s; only the perception of his paintings will present me with the uniquely existing Cézanne, and only in this perception can the analyses take on their full sense” (*PdP* 187/*PhP* 152), and about a sonata, “This power of expression is well known in art, for example in music. The musical signification of the sonata is inseparable from the sounds that carry it: prior to having heard it, no analysis allows us to anticipate it. . . . During the performance, the sounds are not merely the “signs” of the sonata; rather, the sonata is there through them and it descends into them” (*PdP* 223/*PhP* 188).

<sup>28</sup>Following Husserl, in *Experience and Judgment* (see, e.g. 32–36, 361), Merleau-Ponty describes the horizon of sense as the “internal horizon” of the object, which contrasts with the “external horizon” of the object that is defined in terms of the other objects in our perceptual field that we could perceive instead of this one (*PdP* 96/*PhP* 70).

<sup>29</sup>Kelly, “Seeing Things,” 93–94, 96, e.g. describes the horizon in terms of the view from everywhere; however, the worry with this move is that by characterizing the horizon as what is constituted by the objects that see the focal object, we make the horizon more determinate than Merleau-Ponty does.

Ponty's view, the horizon is indeterminate: it does not indicate exactly how the object will manifest itself, but rather the general way in which the object's style will show up. Consider, once again, the parallel to the aesthetic case: even if I am familiar with Mozart's style, I can only anticipate in a general way what I will encounter when I listen to *The Marriage of Figaro* for the first time. Likewise, for Merleau-Ponty, the style of an ordinary object opens up a horizon that only indicates the general way the object will show up in the future, leaving the details indeterminate.

What is more, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the status of the object as open and mysterious is linked to the indeterminacy of its horizon:

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." That is what is sometimes expressed when it is said that the thing and the world are mysterious. (*PdP* 390/*PhP* 348)

Indeed, this is, in part, why Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the notion of a horizon: a horizon is something that holds out the unknown to you as something to explore. So, although a style opens up a horizon in which the object with its consistent style can be encountered from different perspectives, this horizon is indeterminate and so leaves the object opaque and incomplete in the way that Merleau-Ponty thinks it is.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty's style thesis amounts to the thesis that style is the inseparable principle that binds the parts of an object together into an existential unity and that opens up an indeterminate horizon of sense.

### 5.2. *The Style Recognition Thesis*

While the style thesis is oriented towards the object of perception, the style recognition thesis concerns the role of the subject in perception. As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty thinks that style recognition involves us recognizing the object's style and its horizon in bodily perception and that this makes a particular form of perceptual synthesis possible in which we synthesize how the object appears to our current point of view with how it appears from other points of view.

In order to begin exploring this thesis, I want to take our cue from the following claim in the "The Thing" chapter about how we perceive the unity of the world (part of which we discussed above):

The world has its unity without the mind having succeeded in linking its sides together and in integrating them in the conception of a geometrical plan. This unity is comparable to that of an individual whom I recognize in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character, because he conserves the same style in all that he says and in all of his behavior, even if he changes milieu or opinions. . . . I experience [*éprouve*] the unity of the world just as I recognize a style. (*PdP* 384/*PhP* 342)

Here, Merleau-Ponty claims that the unity of the world cannot be grasped intellectually, but rather is something we recognize as we recognize the style of an individual person. Though this passage is about how we experience the unity of the world, I believe that the idea that we recognize unity by recognizing style can



be extended to his analysis of how we perceive things. In the first place, we know that he attributes style to perceived things both in the *Phenomenology* and in the texts in which he summarizes the *Phenomenology*. Furthermore, the way Merleau-Ponty continues in the pages following this passage encourages the application of these claims about the unity of the world to the unity of the perceived thing. I take this to be the case because he goes on to present his explanation of how we can grasp the world as the same through its perspectival appearances side by side with an analysis of how this works with perceived things, like a town or a stone (see, e.g. *PdP* 385–86/*PhP* 344; *PdP* 387/*PhP* 345).<sup>30</sup> For these reasons, I think we can fruitfully draw on the notion of style recognition in this passage in order to flesh out Merleau-Ponty's view of how we perceive the unity of objects.<sup>31</sup>

So what does style recognition involve? To start, given that style is something that is inseparable from the actually existing thing, in order to grasp its style, we must directly perceive it. As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty takes this insight to be something we are familiar with from aesthetics: in order to grasp the full meaning of an Agnes Martin painting, I need to see it. This, however, is an insight he takes to apply to our perception of ordinary things as well (here filling out a quotation from above):

in perception the thing is given to us “in person,” or “in flesh and blood.” . . . [T]he thing accomplishes this miracle of expression: an interior that is revealed on the outside, a signification that descends into the world and begins to exist there and that can only be fully understood by attempting to see it there, in its place. . . . The thing . . . is not at first a signification for the understanding, but rather a structure available for inspection by the body. (*PdP* 375–76/*PhP* 333–34)

Since the object presents itself to us as a structure to be inspected by our bodies, in order to recognize its style, we need to see it, touch it, hear it etc. Hence, the first point to make about style recognition is that it involves direct bodily perception.

Second, when we recognize an object's style we become aware both of that style as what gives unity to the object and of the indeterminate horizon that the object's style opens up. With regard to the former point, given that a style is a principle of unity, recognizing it will involve recognizing it as what unifies all the parts of an object together into a whole. In this way, recognizing the style of an ordinary object is similar to recognizing the style of a work of art. Just as when I

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<sup>30</sup>More specifically, as the analytical table of contents indicates, in this section, Section C (“The Natural World”), Merleau-Ponty is dealing with the topics of “The world as style. As an individual”; “The world appears perspectively, but is not posited by a synthesis of the understanding”; “Transition synthesis”; and “Reality and incompleteness of the world: the world is open” (*PdP* 535/*PhP* lxiii). Though these topics are guiding his analysis of the world, they are themes that pervade his discussion of things as well: things have style, things are individuals, they appear perspectively but are not posited by the understanding, they involve transition synthesis (which I discuss below), and they are incomplete and open. I believe it is on account of this overlap that Merleau-Ponty discusses the unity of things side by side with the world in Section C.

<sup>31</sup>For the purposes of this paper, I am setting aside the issues surrounding the constancy of the world. However, it should be noted that here, too, Merleau-Ponty appeals to the notion of style, claiming that “The natural world . . . is the style of all styles, which ensures my experiences have a given, not a willed, unity beneath all of the ruptures of my personal and historical life” (*PdP* 386–87/*PhP* 345). Merleau-Ponty adds that “we find that the perceived world, in its turn, is not a pure object of thought without fissures or lacunae; it is, rather, like a universal style shared in by all perceptual beings” (*PrP* 6).



look at Martin's *This Rain*, for example, I recognize its style as what gives unity to its subtle colors, straight lines, spatial arrangement etc. so too when I recognize the style of an ashtray, I recognize it as what gives unity to all its parts.

Meanwhile, with regard to our awareness of the horizon, on Merleau-Ponty's view, recognizing an object's style makes us aware that the object has a whole host of other aspects that manifest this style, which would be available to different perspectives. Of course, since the horizon is indeterminate, I do not have a determinate grasp of exactly how the object will show up from these other perspectives; rather, I have a more general sense that the object's style will be displayed through its other aspects in some way.

In order to make sense of the indeterminacy in our awareness of the horizon, it is helpful to attend to the distinction Merleau-Ponty draws between 'positing' and 'intending.' On his view, whereas positing something, as we saw in section 2.2, involves representing it in a determinate way in consciousness, intending something only requires that we be directed toward it. He argues that the latter can happen without conscious representation in thought at all, merely through our bodies. Indeed, one of Merleau-Ponty's central claims in the *Phenomenology* is that our bodies are capable of a particular type of intentionality that he calls 'motor intentionality,' which involves intending or being directed towards objects in virtue of our bodily movements and actions.<sup>32</sup> To use his example, when I reach for something, I intend the object not by explicitly positing it in representation, but rather through the gesture of my hand, which itself anticipates the object and so contains a "reference" (*référence*) to it (*PdP* 172/*PhP* 140; *PdP* 173/*PhP* 525). He describes this latter reference as a "practical" one, meaning that it involves an intention that is mediated not by representation, but by the anticipations involved in bodily movement and action (*PdP* 173/*PhP* 525).

This bears on his analysis of our awareness of the horizon, for, on Merleau-Ponty's view, we grasp an object's horizon not by explicitly positing it in consciousness, but rather through the motor intentions of our bodies. As he says of the gaze, for example, "my human gaze never *posits* more than one side of the object, even if by means of horizons it intends all the others" (*PdP* 98/*PhP* 72). I take his idea to be that we intend or anticipate the sides of the object that are contained in the horizon as sides we could engage with through our bodily actions and movements. To be sure, given that the horizon is indeterminate, we need not form motor intentions that direct us towards exactly what we will encounter; rather, our familiarity with the object's style allows us to anticipate in a general way what we will encounter. To use Merleau-Ponty's language, even if we cannot "foresee" what is contained in the horizon, given our familiarity with the object's style we can be "'equipped' and prepared'" for what we will encounter (*PdP* 377/*PhP* 335). When I, say, pick up an unfamiliar coffee mug, even if I cannot anticipate exactly what I will find when I turn it around or peer inside of it, my familiarity with its style gives me a general sense of what I will find, for example, a handle as opposed to a spike or

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<sup>32</sup>This is a point that Kelly emphasizes in his discussion of our "motor intentional understanding" as a kind of "bodily readiness" to engage with the features of the object that are not currently present to us ("Seeing Things," 100).

a smooth interior as opposed to a craggy one. It is this awareness of the object's indeterminate horizon, along with an awareness of its style as what gives unity to its parts, that we achieve through style recognition.

The final claim to emphasize about style recognition is that our bodily awareness of the object's style and horizon makes a distinctive sort of perceptual synthesis possible in which we synthesize together the various perspectival appearances of an object, that is, those available to our current perspective with those available to other perspectives. In general, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that, given the perspectival nature of perception, we can never encounter an object all at once; instead, all that is available to us are different perspectival appearances of an object, which we have to combine together in order to perceive an object from different perspectives. On his view, this synthesis is made possible by style recognition: it is because I recognize the object's style as something that unifies the parts of an object together and opens up a horizon that I am able to synthesize its current perspectival appearance together with the appearances of others parts available to other points of view.

Though the idea that perception involves synthesis may at first blush seem like exactly the sort of view Merleau-Ponty intends to reject, we must appreciate that this is not an intellectual form of synthesis, but rather a bodily one.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, Merleau-Ponty objects to the idea that in perception we intellectually synthesize discrete representations of an object in consciousness;<sup>34</sup> nevertheless, he allows for perception to involve a type of bodily synthesis, which he, following Husserl, calls 'transition synthesis.'<sup>35</sup> In transition synthesis, instead of us having to put together

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<sup>33</sup>One of Merleau-Ponty's models for intellectual synthesis is what Kant calls "synthesis of recognition in the concept" (see, e.g. A 103). References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited according to the standard A and B pagination for the first and second edition, respectively.

<sup>34</sup>In more detail, Merleau-Ponty argues that this sort of view is wrong because it "distorts our lived relation with things. If the perceiving subject [understood intellectually] accomplishes the synthesis of the perceived, he must dominate and think a material of perception, he must himself organize and unite all of the appearances of a thing; that is, perception must lose its inherence in an individual subject and in a point of view, and the thing must lose its transcendence and its opacity" (*PdP* 382/*PhP* 340). Just as we saw him argue in the Introduction to Part One, then, in the context of discussing intellectual synthesis he argues that this view mischaracterizes the subject with her embodied perspective and the object with its transcendence and opacity. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty argues that this view is ill-founded because if we look more closely at our lived experience, we will find that we do not experience discrete perspectival appearances that need to be combined together through consciousness at all. When I perceive a town I approach by train, for example, Merleau-Ponty says that, although the town changes its appearances, "the profiles do not succeed each other and are not juxtaposed in front of me. My experience in these different moments is united with itself in such a way that I do not have different perspectival views linked together through the conception of an invariant. . . . It is reflection that objectifies these points of view or perspectives" (*PdP* 385–86/*PhP* 344).

<sup>35</sup>As Donald Landes notes (*PhP* 542, n. 42), Merleau-Ponty draws the notion of transition synthesis from Husserl's discussion of passive synthesis in *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, 444, 582. However, Merleau-Ponty also has in mind Husserl's discussion of synthetic transition and kinesthesia in Section 19 of *Experience and Judgment*: "In this sense, every object of external perception is given in an 'image,' and the object is constituted in the synthetic transition [*synthetischen Übergang*] from image to image, by means of which the images, as images (appearances) of the same object, come to have synthetic coincidence [*Deckung*]. Every perception which presents the object to me in this orientation leaves open the practical transitions [*Übergänge*] to other appearances of the same object. The possibilities of transition [*Übergangsmöglichkeiten*] are *practical* possibilities. . . . There is thus a freedom to run through [*durchlaufen*] the appearances in such a way that I move my eyes, my head,

representations in thought, our bodies enable the perspectival appearances of the object to fluidly pass into or transition into one another:

I do not have one perspectival view, then another, along with a link established by the understanding; rather, each perspective *passes into* the other and, if one can still speak here of a synthesis, then it will be a 'transition synthesis.' (*PdP* 386/*PhP* 344)

On Merleau-Ponty's view, this is a bodily form of synthesis because it is the motor intentions of our bodies that enable the seamless transition of appearances:

the synthesis which constitutes the unity of perceived objects . . . is not an intellectual synthesis. Let us say with Husserl that it is a 'synthesis of transition'—I anticipate the unseen side of the lamp because I can touch it. (*PrP* 15)

As we see in this passage, Merleau-Ponty suggests that in transition synthesis the various perspectival appearances of an object are synthesized together in virtue of the anticipations, that is, intentions of our bodies. Making this point in the "Primacy of Perception," Merleau-Ponty says,

The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them. The subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception and action. (*PrP* 16)

On his view, then, when I encounter an object, I am intentionally directed through my body not just towards the parts of the object present to me here and now, but also towards the parts in the horizon that "go beyond" my current perspective. These intentions are what synthesize together the parts of the object that are present to me with the parts that are not present. To use the lamp example, I am able to synthesize together the appearance of the front side of the lamp with its backside because when I look at its front side, I intend its backside. Thus, it is this intention that binds the appearances together.

On Merleau-Ponty's view, transition synthesis can be accomplished through different types of motor intentions. Some motor intentions are situation dependent, for example, my intention to pick up the pear on my desk or to pour champagne into a flute. However, on Merleau-Ponty's view, our bodies have a more stable intention, which we could call a 'total motor intention,' that is, an intention that directs our body with its various sense modalities towards the object as a whole with all the parts contained in its horizon.<sup>36</sup> In Merleau-Ponty's words,

every object given to one sense calls forth the corresponding operation of all the others. . . . I perceive a thing because I have a field of existence and because each phenomenon polarizes my entire body, as a system of perceptual powers, toward it. (*PdP* 373/*PhP* 332)

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alter the posture of my body, go around the object, direct my regard toward it, and so on. We call these movements, which belong to the essence of perception and serve to bring the object of perception to givenness from all sides insofar as possible, *kinaestheses*. They are consequences of perceptive tendencies, 'activities' in a certain sense, although not voluntary actions. In doing all this, I do not (in general) carry out voluntary acts. I move my eyes, etc., involuntarily, without 'thinking about my eyes'" (83–84, translation modified).

<sup>36</sup>This analysis of 'total intention' is influenced by Michael Madary's discussion of the role total intentions play in Husserl's account of perceptual constancy in "Husserl on Perceptual Constancy."

This total intention thus directs our body as a whole towards the object as a whole. For example, my perception of the lamp involves a total motor intention that directs my body visually, tactilely, audibly etc. toward the lamp with its various parts, for example, its front side, back side, texture, color etc. Both situation dependent intentions and this total motor intention will enable us to synthesize various perspectival appearances of an object together because they intentionally direct us towards the parts of the object that are not present to our current point of view.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty treats transition synthesis as something that can take place in both a diachronic and synchronic way. Our motor intentions enable us to synthesize together not only the different perspectival appearances of an object we encounter over time, for example, the perceptions I have of Chartres as I approach it by train (*PdP* 386/*PhP* 344), but also the current perspectival appearance of an object with the appearances not available at a single moment in time, for example, when I perceive the lamp as having a back side even though I am looking at its front side (*PrP* 15). In the latter synchronic case, the synthesis is one that takes place merely through intention. For example, the appearance of the object available to my current perspective is synthesized together with its other appearances because my body is intentionally directed towards the other appearances of the object, for example, the appearance of the front side of the lamp I am looking at now is synthesized together with the appearance of its hidden back side because I intend the back side.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, in the diachronic case, the synthesis involves not just intention, but fulfillment as well: when I encounter an object over time, the perceptions of it are synthesized together not only in virtue of being guided by my motor intentions, but also because they partially fulfill those intentions. For example, the various perceptions I have of Chartres over the course of a one-hour train ride are synthesized together because each of them is governed by and is a partial fulfillment of my, say, total intention that is directed towards Chartres.

Although this sheds light on how transition synthesis is mediated by our motor intentions, it is important to see that this process is guided by the sort of awareness of an object's style and the horizon it opens up discussed above. This is the case, in part, because in order to be able to synthesize the perspectival appearances of an object together, I must have a sense that those appearances are unified and, on Merleau-Ponty's view, it is our recognition of the object's style that gives us this sense of unity. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, this is an important point of contrast between intellectual synthesis and transition synthesis: whereas in intellectual synthesis we are responsible for unifying the representations of the object together in thought, in transition synthesis we are following the grooves laid out by the object's style. Additionally, however, this is the case because our motor intentions are directed towards the object's horizon. I can only form motor intentions directing me towards the parts of the object available to other perspectives if I have an awareness that the object, in fact, has parts available to other perspectives and this is what my awareness of the object's indeterminate horizon makes possible. So, for Merleau-Ponty, it is only because we are aware of the object's style and the horizon it opens

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<sup>37</sup>I shall return to this topic in my discussion of perceptual presence in sect. 6.1.

up that we are able to engage in the sort of transition synthesis required to combine different perspectival appearances of an object together.

Taking this all together, on Merleau-Ponty's view, style recognition is something that involves the direct bodily recognition of an object's style as what gives unity to its parts and the indeterminate horizon it opens up. Recognizing the object's style and horizon, in turn, makes it possible for us to synthesize different perspectival appearances of an object together by means of the motor intentions of our bodies.

## 6. MERLEAU-PONTY'S SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTUAL PRESENCE AND CONSTANCY

With both the style thesis and style recognition thesis in place, we are finally in a position to address Merleau-Ponty's solutions to the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy directly. After presenting his solutions to these problems (section 6.1), I will return to Kelly's and Noë's interpretations, and consider how my interpretation differs from theirs and how Merleau-Ponty's appeal to style allows him to avoid the unification problem in a way that Kelly and Noë do not (section 6.2).

### 6.1. Merleau-Ponty's Solutions

Let us begin with perceptual presence. Merleau-Ponty offers his most straightforward analysis of perceptual presence in "The Primacy of Perception," claiming that,

I grasp the unseen side as present. . . . The hidden side is present in its own way. . . . It is not through an intellectual synthesis which would freely posit the total object that I am led from what is given to what is not actually given; that I am given, together with the visible sides of the object, the nonsensible sides as well. It is, rather, a kind of practical synthesis: I can touch the lamp, and not only the side turned toward me but also the other side; I have only to extend my hand to hold it. (*PrP* 14)<sup>38</sup>

As we saw above in our discussion of synchronic transition synthesis, on Merleau-Ponty's view, even though I directly perceive the front side of the lamp, I am able to make the lamp's back side present "in its own way" through a bodily intention, which synthesizes the back side together with the front side. However, my anticipation of the lamp's back side is not just an anticipation of a back side in general: it is an intention directed toward the back side of "this lamp," that is, toward the back side of the lamp that is included in the horizon delineated by its unique style. So the motor intention that allows me to synthesize the backside as present in its own way with the front side is guided by my recognition of the lamp's style and its horizon. Thus, it is the reciprocal interaction between the object's style and horizon, on the one hand, and my body's recognition of that style, synthesis, and intentions, on the other, that makes perceptual presence possible.

Turning now to Merleau-Ponty's account of object constancy, we find him employing a similar two-pronged strategy. With regard to the object, Merleau-Ponty maintains that it is something that can be recognized as the same in spite of the differences in its perspectival appearances because it has a style that persists

<sup>38</sup>For his discussion of perceptual presence in the *Phenomenology*, see, e.g. *PdP* 121/*PhP* 95; *PdP* 328/*PhP* 289; *PdP* 388/*PhP* 346; and *PdP* 478/*PhP* 439.

through and unifies those appearances. Meanwhile, on the subject's side of things, as we saw in our analysis of diachronic transition synthesis, our various perceptions of those appearances are synthesized together in virtue of being governed by motor intentions and by the partial fulfillments of those intentions. This can happen through situation dependent intentions, for example, if I intend to turn on my lamp, then the various appearances of it as I walk across the room and switch it on with my hand will be synthesized together because they are governed by and partially fulfill that intention. I can also perceive an object as constant on account of my total motor intention that directs my body as a whole, through its various sense modalities, to the object as a whole, with all its properties. For example, every perception I have of the lamp, whether in the morning or evening, whether of its color or texture, will be synthesized together through this total motor intention and by being a partial fulfillment of it. However, as we saw in our discussion of style recognition, our ability to synthesize the object and its various appearances together through our motor intentions is, in turn, dependent upon our recognition of the object's style and its indeterminate horizon; in which case, our experience of object constancy, like our experience of perceptual presence, ultimately depends on style recognition.

This analysis of object constancy, in turn, paves the way for understanding Merleau-Ponty's account of property constancy, for we should now be in a better position to unpack his claim that the constancy of a property is an "abstract moment of the constancy of things" (*PdP* 368/*PhP* 326). Once again, I want to orient this by first considering the role an object's property plays and then the contribution of the subject.

With regard to the property, it is important to bear in mind that, on Merleau-Ponty's view, an object's properties are determined by its style. Recall his claim that

The unity of the thing . . . is . . . that unique manner of existing of which its properties are a secondary expression. For example, the fragility, rigidity, transparency, and crystalline sound of a glass express a single manner of being. (*PdP* 374/*PhP* 333)

Each property, then, is determined by the object's style insofar as it is an expression of it. Moreover, he thinks that this style is something that unifies that property with all the other properties in an object and that this further determines the property. As he says, for example, about a woolen carpet,

it is impossible to describe fully the color of a carpet without saying that it is a carpet, or a woolen carpet, and without implying in this color a certain tactile value, a certain weight, and a certain resistance to sound. The thing is this manner of being in which the complete definition of an attribute demands that of the entire subject. (*PdP* 379/*PhP* 337)

While this passage, in part, implies that we cannot grasp the color of the carpet without grasping the other properties of the carpet, these other properties are, in turn, unified together in virtue of the carpet's manner of being, that is, style. Thus, the red of the carpet is defined by its style not only insofar as it is an expression of that style, but also because that style binds it to all the other properties in the carpet. As we might make this point, if you have two red objects, say a red carpet and a red dress, the redness of each will not be the same because each red will be



determined by the respective object's style and the way in which this style binds the redness to the object's other properties. In turn, what this means is that, on Merleau-Ponty's view, constant properties are dependent upon an object's style and the relationship to the object's other properties that this style founds. Indeed, I take this to be one of the reasons why Merleau-Ponty describes property constancy as an 'abstract moment' of object constancy: constant properties do not float free from, but rather depend on, an object and its style.

Turning now to the role played by the subject, there are two points to make. First, as I think Noë's enactive view nicely highlights, Merleau-Ponty maintains that our ability to perceive properties as constant depends on bodily knowledge. Contrary to intellectualist (or what we would call 'inferentialist') accounts, according to which we are first aware of the perspectival appearance of the property, for example, the elliptical appearance of a Frisbee, and then infer the true property, for example, its circularity, on that basis, Merleau-Ponty maintains that we do not have to rely on this sort of cognitive inference because our body has knowledge that makes this inference unnecessary. Indeed, one of Merleau-Ponty's core claims about the body in the *Phenomenology* is that it has its own knowledge. This is a practical form of knowledge that involves know-how and our skillful ability to deal with the world through movement, perception, and action. He takes this type of knowledge to be exemplified by habits, for example, our ability to switch lanes while driving a car or to type on a keyboard, which do not rely on any explicit calculation or reflection, but rather on the knowledge our bodies have of how to navigate the situation (*PdP* 178–79/*PhP* 144–45). As he says of typing, for example, "Knowing how to type, then, is not the same as knowing the location of each letter on the keyboard. . . . It is a question of a knowledge in our hands" (*PdP* 180/*PhP* 145).

Though much more could be said about Merleau-Ponty's view of bodily knowledge, for our purposes what I want to focus on is his claim that some of this practical knowledge involves knowing how different properties show up in different perceptual circumstances.<sup>39</sup> In color perception, for example, he claims that "My gaze 'knows' [*sait*] what such a patch of light signifies in such a context, and it understands the logic of illumination" (*PdP* 383/*PhP* 341; see also *PdP* 367/*PhP* 326). When I thus encounter, say, a red dress in uneven lighting conditions, I do

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<sup>39</sup>In Merleau-Ponty's technical language, we have this knowledge in virtue of having a "body schema" (*schéma*). The body schema, he argues, contains various patterns of movements or what he calls 'typics' (*typiques*) through which we can track meanings as they are presented to our various sense modalities in varying perceptual conditions (see, e.g. *PdP* 383/*PhP* 341. Though Landes translates *typique* as 'schema,' Merleau-Ponty has two terms here, *typique* and *schéma*, which refer to different things: whereas a 'typic' is something he usually associates with one sense modality, e.g. the typic associated with seeing color, the body 'schema' is something that encompasses our body as a whole. Moreover, translating *typique* as 'typic' highlights the connection between Merleau-Ponty's view and Husserl's analysis, in sect. 8 of *Experience and Judgment*, of the role a 'type' [*Typik*] plays in perception). So our knowledge of how a certain color shows up in varying perceptual conditions is grounded in the typic associated with our gaze: "To have senses such as vision is to possess this general arrangement, this typic [*typique*] of possible visual relations with the help of which we are capable of taking up every given visual constellation" (*PdP* 383/*PhP* 341, translation modified). Though this typic certainly begins paving the way for perceiving a color as constant, I argue below that this must be supplemented by a recognition of the object's style, for this is what determines what the object's constant color is in the first place. For a lengthier discussion of my interpretation of the body schema and typics, see Samantha Matherne, "Kantian Themes."



not first perceive a mottled surface and then infer its constant red on that basis. Instead, my gaze knows how that red appears in different lighting conditions and by taking this relationship between the color and lighting conditions into account, it enables us to perceive the dress as a constant red. He makes a similar point about perceiving a square from different angles:

The act that corrects appearances, giving acute or obtuse angles the value of right angles . . . is the investment of the object by my gaze that penetrates it, animates it, and immediately makes the lateral faces count as “squares seen from an angle.” To the extent that we do not even see them according to their diamond-shaped perspectival appearance. (*PdP* 314/*PhP* 276)<sup>40</sup>

Here, too, it seems that our ability to perceive the constant square-shape depends on the knowledge our gaze has of how that shape shows up from different angles. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, in order to perceive properties as constant, we must rely on our bodily knowledge of how a property shows up in different perceptual conditions.

However, and this brings us to the second point about the subject’s contribution to property constancy, insofar as it is the object’s style that fixes what its constant properties are, if we are to be aware of a constant property, then we must be attuned to the object’s style. More specifically, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, our experience of property constancy, like that of perceptual presence and object constancy, involves synthesis. Even though a property appears in varying ways in varying circumstances, we are able to perceive the property as constant because we have a motor intention that directs us toward the constant property, which allows us to bring that property to bear on what we perceive here and now. For example, if I see a red dress in uneven lighting conditions, I will be able to experience it as a constant red because I have a motor intention that synthesizes the mottled appearance of the red together with its constant red. However, in order for us to be intentionally directed towards this constant property, we must grasp what that property is in the first place. And given that, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, the constant property is determined by the object’s style, our awareness of the constant property depends on our awareness of the object’s style. The constant red of the dress, for example, is something that is determined by the dress’s style: it is an expression of that style and that style unifies it with all the other properties of the dress. So, if I am to be able to intend that red in the way required for synthesis and the experience of constancy, I must first recognize the dress’s style.

Consequently, in property constancy, my body cannot just rely on a general understanding of how properties show up in different perceptual conditions;<sup>41</sup> rather, our bodies must rely on more specific knowledge of how this property as a property of this object with this style shows up in different circumstances. To know, for example, that it is the dress’s red that is appearing as mottled in this uneven lighting, I must know how that red, which is determined by the dress’s style, shows

<sup>40</sup>See n. 19 in sect. 3 for a discussion of how this passage bears on Merleau-Ponty’s view of apparent properties.

<sup>41</sup>This general familiarity with how properties manifest in different perceptual conditions is something made possible by the body schema, which I discuss in n. 39 above.

up in different circumstances. Ultimately, then, although Merleau-Ponty thinks that our ability to perceive a property as constant depends on our bodily knowledge of how different properties show up in different situations, this knowledge, in turn, is grounded in our bodily recognition of an object's style.

In the end, on my interpretation, the key to Merleau-Ponty's solutions to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy turns on acknowledging the role played, on the one hand, by the object's style and its horizon, and on the other, by our bodily ability to recognize style.

### 6.2. *The Alternative Interpretations*

It is at this point that I would like to return to Kelly's and Noë's interpretations and consider how my style-based interpretation differs from theirs. One of the points on which all of our interpretations converge is with respect to the central role that bodily awareness of how objects and properties appear from different perspectives plays in Merleau-Ponty's solutions to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy. Whether we consider Kelly's emphasis on our bodily readiness to engage with the object's horizon, Noë's view of sensorimotor knowledge, or my analysis of the role the body plays in style recognition, synthesis, and intentionality, we can all agree that, for Merleau-Ponty, we are able to perceive hidden sides of objects as present and properties and objects as constant because we have a practical, embodied form of knowledge that allows us to do so. Yet, insofar as my interpretation situates this analysis of bodily knowledge within the framework of style recognition, I read Merleau-Ponty as committed to a more specific style-oriented form of bodily knowledge being required for perceptual presence and constancy than Kelly and Noë do.

Meanwhile, one of the issues on which our interpretations come apart is with respect to the role that normativity plays in these experiences. Although Noë criticizes Kelly's emphasis on normativity, I am in agreement with Kelly that, for Merleau-Ponty, our experience of perceptual presence and constancy involves normative awareness of what a better or worse look on an object is. In addition to there being textual support for this view, for example, the passage cited above in which Merleau-Ponty claims that there is an "optimal" distance and orientation through which an object "presents more of itself" and that we "tend toward the maximum of visibility" (*PdP* 355/*PhP* 315–16), I believe that we can draw support for this view from his analysis of motor intentionality. Whereas Noë claims that vision is "all-purpose," as we have now seen in detail, Merleau-Ponty thinks that our perceptions are guided by our motor intentions and these intentions, of both the situation dependent and total variety, shape our vision and perception of the world. I believe that these intentions, in turn, ground certain norms: a better perception is one that at least partially fulfills these intentions, whereas a worse perception is one that does not.<sup>42</sup> By my lights, then, the normative structure of perception

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<sup>42</sup>One of the ways in which Kelly tries to address this sort of worry is by arguing that the optimal context is the one that allows us to perceive "more of the object's *revealing* features," e.g. the back side of a façade or the handle of a coffee mug ("Seeing Things," 93). In a footnote, he indicates that our "needs and desires" contribute to what counts as "the *most* revealing" features of the object (Kelly, "Seeing Things," 109, n. 29).

is something that follows, at least in part, from Merleau-Ponty's commitment to motor intentionality.

Though in acknowledging the role of normativity in Merleau-Ponty's view of perception, I am in agreement with Kelly, where my view departs from his is with respect to the relationship between norms and the constant objects we perceive. On Kelly's reading, in order to account for the normativity involved in object constancy, Merleau-Ponty identifies a constant object as the norm defined by the view from everywhere. However, one worry about this strategy is that treating a constant object as a norm is something that Merleau-Ponty is generally wary of. We see this, for example, in "The Thing" chapter, where Merleau-Ponty, in fact, takes up the idea of "The thing as norm of perception" (*PdP* 373/*PhP* 331). In this section, he considers defining a thing as what is revealed to us when "the perceived configuration, for a sufficient clarity, reaches its maximum richness" (*PhP* 332/*PdP* 374). In other words, the thing would be defined normatively as what we apprehend when our perception reaches the perfect balance of richness and clarity. However, later in this chapter Merleau-Ponty criticizes this view:

The thing appeared to us above as the . . . norm of our psycho-physiological arrangement. But that was merely a psychological definition that did not make explicit the full sense of the thing defined. (*PdP* 379/*PhP* 337)

He goes on to make it clear that the "full sense" of the thing depends upon our recognition of it as "real," that is, as something that does not depend entirely on us: "We do not see ourselves in it, and this is precisely what makes it a thing" (*PdP* 380/*PhP* 338).<sup>43</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, then, the risk of identifying the thing with a norm is that you neglect its essential character as that which is real.

Now, I do not think that Kelly's conception of the constant object as a norm runs into quite this problem because he insists that the norm is defined not by us, but by the other objects that "see" the focal object. However, this move involves appealing to the seeing things passage, which I have argued is problematic. Yet even if one reads the seeing things passage as reflective of Merleau-Ponty's own position, I still do not think it can offer us an adequate account of constant objects because Kelly's gloss of the constant object as a norm seems to downplay the importance to Merleau-Ponty of the reality of the constant object. On Kelly's reading, the object seen from everywhere is a norm or ideal that is, in fact, unrealizable and this idea seems in tension with Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the reality of the constant object. A constant object, as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it, is something concrete and real that we are in direct "communication" or in "communion" with, and this seems quite different from the relationship we have to an unrealizable norm (*PdP* 376/*PhP* 334).

My interpretation, however, can accommodate not only this insight into the reality of the things we perceive, but also the indeterminacy and normativity of perception that Kelly's view highlights and it does so, here paralleling Noë to

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<sup>43</sup>Of course, Merleau-Ponty does not conceive of a thing as something that exists entirely "in-itself," for that would be giving into the prejudice of objective thought. For Merleau-Ponty, a thing is "a genuine in-itself-for-us," i.e. it is both defined as "the correlate of our body" and as "a resolutely silent Other" (*PdP* 378/*PhP* 336).

some extent, by laying emphasis on the notion of style. In the first place, on my interpretation, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of style is part and parcel of his analysis of a constant object as an "existential" unity, which, recall is an existing object whose parts are unified together by its inseparable style. Conceiving of objects in this way is, indeed, part of his larger phenomenological effort to "place essences back within existence" and to respect the "facticity" of human beings and the world we experience (*PdP* 7/*PhP* lxx). Thus, Merleau-Ponty accounts for the reality of things we perceive by treating them as existential unities that are unified through their style.

Moreover, on my reading, Merleau-Ponty can explain the indeterminacy of perception by appealing to style because style is not something we experience in a wholly determinate way. As he makes this point in the passage about an individual's style discussed above,

I recognize [an individual] in an irrecusable evidentness prior to having succeeded in giving the formula of his character . . . the definition of a style, as accurate as it might be, never presents the exact equivalent and is only of interest to those who have already experienced the style. (*PdP* 384/*PhP* 343)

Style, then, is something that is perceptually evident to us, but it resists attempts at comprehensive formulation. Our recognition of it and the horizon it opens up is thus indeterminate.

Finally, by my lights, Merleau-Ponty is able to account for the normativity of perception by appealing to the object's style and our motor intentions that are sensitive to this style. To be sure, with regard to the latter point about motor intentions, I am in agreement with Kelly that our sense of what is a more or less optimal perception of an object is guided by whether that perception fulfills, or at least partially fulfills, those intentions. However, whereas on his view those motor intentions are, in turn, guided by the constant object defined as the norm constituted by the view from everywhere, I take them to be guided by the constant object defined as an existential unity with its unique style. The advantage of my view, then, is that we can make sense of how the object normatively guides perception without thereby committing Merleau-Ponty to the view that the constant object is a norm that can, in principle, never be realized.

Thus, without recourse to the seeing things passage and the view from everywhere, we find that by relying on style Merleau-Ponty offers an account of object constancy that is able to accommodate both the reality of things, as well as what I take Kelly to rightly highlight, viz. the indeterminacy and normativity in perception. While this is not the same notion of style as the one Noë offers, insofar as Merleau-Ponty gives style a central place in his attempts to make sense of perception this aspect of his view is in the same spirit as Noë's.

Finally, I believe that my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty reveals that his style-based account does not face the unification problem in the way that Kelly's and Noë's do. As we have seen, with regard to the unity of the object, Merleau-Ponty can explain this by appealing to the object's style: the various appearances of the object are unified together as appearances of the same object because they all are grounded in the object's unique style. Indeed, this is precisely the upshot

of his analysis of style as the principle of an existential unity. As for the unity of our experience, Merleau-Ponty can appeal to the idea of our motor intentions: each perception of an object is unified to the other perceptions of it in virtue of the motor intentions that guide those perceptions and that those perceptions partially fulfill.<sup>44</sup> However, given that these motor intentions are ultimately guided by the object's style, the unity of our experience will ultimately depend on style recognition. Merleau-Ponty's style-based account thus has the resources for accommodating the unity of both the object and our experience of it in phenomena like perceptual presence and perceptual constancy.

### 7. THE ART OF PERCEPTION

In the end, a proper appreciation of the role that style and style recognition play in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy reveals that, far from his account containing lacunae, he offers us a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of these perceptual phenomena. By way of conclusion, I want to highlight what I take to be a compelling feature of Merleau-Ponty's general phenomenological strategy, viz. his appeal to an aesthetic notion in order to elucidate ordinary perceptual phenomena.

From Merleau-Ponty's point of view, we will make no real headway with the problems of perceptual presence and perceptual constancy if we rely on the ordinary solutions offered by the "empiricist" who appeals to physiological or psychological reflexes or the "intellectualist" who appeals to judgment and cognition. The problem with both of these views, he objects, is that they get the phenomenology of perception wrong: instead of acknowledging that perception is primarily a way we, through our bodies, communicate with things in the world and the meanings they present to us, the empiricist and intellectualist offer an inadequate reconstruction of perception. This, in turn, means that their attempts to explain phenomena like presence and constancy will fail because they have misunderstood the explanandum to begin with.

However, by adopting a phenomenological strategy, Merleau-Ponty hopes to avoid these difficulties by bringing us back to the phenomena as we actually live them. In addition, he thinks that the aesthetic notion of style will be effective to this end because in an aesthetic context, we are aware that the style of a work of art is a type of meaning that we need to perceive with our bodies in order to understand. The style of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902–04), for example, gives meaning to and pervades every aspect of this painting, for example, its colors, its brushstrokes, the organization of the canvas etc.; yet we recognize that no description of its style could serve as a substitute for actually seeing it.<sup>45</sup> It is only in direct perception, then, that we can comprehend the full significance of this painting's style. Now, by parlaying this familiarity we have with style in an aesthetic

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<sup>44</sup>On this point, I have been influenced by Madary's discussion of how Husserl's account of intentions solves the unification problem ("Husserl on Perceptual Constancy," 152); however, I believe that Merleau-Ponty's solution goes beyond Husserl's insofar as he sees our motor intentions as dependent on style recognition.

<sup>45</sup>See, e.g. *PdP* 186/*PhP* 152.

context into how we understand problems like perceptual presence and perceptual constancy, Merleau-Ponty hopes to make progress by exposing us to something about our mundane experience that was there, but remained unnoticed. The appeal to style, in effect, jars us out of our ordinary way of thinking about these problems and makes visible to us the key to solving them.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty's strategy is not unlike that of Cézanne's when he uses his paintings to call our attention to the richness of seeing, say, a mountain vista or bowl of fruit: Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne both rely on aesthetic resources to reveal something to us about ordinary perception.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, however, this comparison should not surprise us. After all, Merleau-Ponty likens his phenomenological project to the work of artists like Cézanne: "Phenomenology is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry, or Cézanne—through the same kind of attention and wonder, the same demand for awareness" (*PdP* 22/*PhP* lxxxv). So understood, the *Phenomenology of Perception* is a large-scale effort on Merleau-Ponty's part to incite these attitudes in us in relation to the world of perception. This, in turn, orients his unique strategy for approaching the problems of presence and constancy: Merleau-Ponty's starting point is less the puzzle of how to explain these phenomena and more an interest in the phenomenological elucidation of them. On my reading, it is precisely in his phenomenological effort to bring these phenomena into focus that he draws on the aesthetic notion of style. And though I hope to have shown how the notion of style serves as the basis for his solutions to the problems of perceptual presence and constancy, above all, it seems the appeal to style is meant to awaken our attention, wonder, and awareness in light of "the things themselves."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>In a somewhat similar vein, Noë argues that "Art and philosophy are one" in the sense that they both involve trying to "bring the world into focus by achieving . . . the right kind of understanding" (*Varieties of Presence*, 127–28).

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