

# A Merleau-Pontian Account of Embodied Perceptual Norms

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## Abstract

*Although philosophers may first find it odd to speak of norms in the context of perception, the argument for normativity finds support in the writings of some of the spearheads of the phenomenological tradition, amongst them Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As Maren Wehrle argues however, a phenomenological analysis of perception's normative claim requires that we redefine our traditional conception of norms as authoritative standards or prescriptive moral guidelines. To this end, as she points out, the origin of the concept of norm in architecture can be illuminating because it refers to a measure or guideline which emerges out of "practical motivations"<sup>1</sup> and serves to "facilitate cooperative and intersubjective communication."<sup>2</sup> In her view, prior to any theoretical or moral engagement with the world, certain sets of norms already play a role at an embodied, pre-reflexive level and account for our ability to orientate ourselves in the intersubjective lifeworld. My interest in the concept of norms stems from such a comprehension, and attempts to unfold and clarify some of its implications for perception in general. My goal in this paper is thus to address one of the key interpretations of perceptual norms in Merleau-Pontian scholarship and to suggest*

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<sup>1</sup> Maren Wehrle, "Normality and Normativity in Experience", in *Normativity in Perception*, ed. Breyer, T. and Doyon, (Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 128-140, here p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

*a new reading of their role in the Phenomenology of Perception (1945), through the lense of interest and temporality.*

A growing number of works in recent scholarship address the topic of normativity in perception and its relevance for phenomenology<sup>3</sup>. Although philosophers may first find it odd to speak of norms in the context of perception, the argument for normativity finds support in the writings of some of the spearheads of the phenomenological tradition, amongst them Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The question of how normativity gets a foothold in perception finds different responses in the philosophical literature, but phenomenologists have generally attempted to show how perceptual behaviors are beholden to norms below the treshold of reflective activity. As Maren Wehrle argues, a phenomenological analysis of perception's normative claim however requires that we redefine our traditional conception of norms as authoritative standards or prescriptive moral guidelines. To this end, as she points out, the origin of the concept of norm in architecture can be illuminating because it refers to a measure or guideline which emerges out of "practical motivations"<sup>4</sup> and serves to "facilitate cooperative and intersubjective communication."<sup>5</sup> In her view, prior to any theoretical or moral engagement with the world, certain sets of norms already play a role at an embodied, pre-reflexive level and account for our ability to orientate ourselves in the intersubjective lifeworld. My interest in the concept of norms stems from such a comprehension,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press, 2013) ; Sean Kelly, "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman, (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.74-110; "The Normative Nature of Perceptual Experience." In *Perceiving the World*, ed. Bence Nanay, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.146-158 ; Erik Rietveld, "Situated Normativity : The Normative Aspect of Embodied Cognition in Unreflective Action." *Mind*, vol. 117, no. 468 (October 2008) : pp. 973-1001 ; Maxime Doyon et Timo Meyer, *Normativity in Perception*, (Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Wehrle, "Normality and Normativity in Experience", p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and attempts to unfold and clarify some of its implications for embodied perception in general.

My goal in this paper is to address one of the key interpretations of perceptual norms in contemporary merleau-pontian scholarship and to suggest a new reading of their role in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), through the lense of interest and temporality. A first section of this paper will thus provide a close reading of Sean Kelly's argument in "Seeing Things In Merleau-Ponty" (2005) and outline his understanding of normativity in perception. Section 2 introduces criticisms raised by Samantha Matherne, in addition to my own, and opens up onto Section 3, which proposes a two-fold reading of perceptual norms in both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl's writings. This last section introduces the concept of (practical) interest and argues in favor of the temporal emergence of perceptual norms and their embeddedness in living temporality.

## **1. Perceptual norms in Merleau-Ponty : the 'view from everywhere' hypothesis**

In a section from the *Phenomenology of Perception* titled 'The Thing and the Natural World', Merleau-Ponty writes : "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."<sup>6</sup> With these words, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the subject's perceptual field is experienced normatively rather than simply descriptively. On this view, the optimal range I establish between me and a painting in a museum is neither formulated as an explicitly laid-out rule, nor is it a distance I could measure objectively. Rather, we might say that the optimal distance Merleau-Ponty refers to is the stance that feels 'just right' or 'appropriate' in a given situation. What's more, the establishment of this distance serves more than the reception of sense-data on my retina : customary phenomenological examples suggest that when the embodied subject sees a painting in a museum or reaches for her glasses on the bedside table, she immediately knows how to optimally

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. Landes (London : Routledge, 2012), p. 315-316.

navigate her surroundings in order to accomplish the task at hand. As Maria Talero puts it, a subject can be said to be “behaviorally attuned”<sup>7</sup> to her environment when she is adequately responsive to the optimal interplay of action and perception it requires.

Hubert Dreyfus’s distinction between success conditions and conditions of improvement works along similar lines to account for normativity in perception. Through this distinction, Dreyfus suggests that our context-dependent sensitivity to conditions of improvement allows us to constantly discriminate between better or worse ways to see things “without the agent needing in any way to anticipate what would count as success.”<sup>8</sup> Although it might first seem peculiar to suggest that agents are driven towards improvement through their bodies, Dreyfus’ view echoes a variety of colloquial sayings that express how our bodies ‘take us here and there’ in everyday action, without prior deliberation. As such, phenomenologists would argue that our encounters with objects and others are bent upon implicitly acquired perceptual norms which shape our perceptual field and play an important part in facilitating our general orientations in the world. This is not to say that deontic norms are not equally important in many areas of our lives, but phenomenologists generally hold that codified or logical norms presuppose an elementary ground of intentional activity that is rooted in our experience of our own bodies.

A central outcrop of the *Phenomenology of Perception* lies precisely in Merleau-Ponty’s detailed articulation of this specific type of motor intentionality and the author explores the subject’s openness to the world, conceived as a norm-sensitive space of (practical) meaning. To this end, as Sean Kelly rightly observes in “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty”, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is uniquely relevant to address the question of normativity. In his paper, Kelly makes use of Merleau-Ponty’s account of perceptual norms to answer a classic problem in philosophy of perception. Put briefly, while Kelly argues that Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of object-perception provides clear answers to the problem of property constancy, he is adamant in

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Talero, “The Experiential Workspace and the Limits of Empirical Investigation”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2017), p. 453-472, here p. 456.

<sup>8</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, “The Primacy of Phenomenology over Logical Analysis”, *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (Fall 1999), p. 3-24, here p. 6.

defending that it does not provide clear answers to the problems of perceptual presence and object constancy<sup>9</sup>. In an attempt to provide answers to these problems, Kelly draws what he takes to be implicit conclusions on Merleau-Ponty's part and argues for a normative account of perceptual experience. The first strokes of Kelly's argument are largely in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's own view in the *Phenomenology* and suggest that the perceptual field is experienced normatively by the embodied subject when perceived affordances render perceptually salient the ways in which indeterminate aspects, elements and profiles (*Abschattungen*) of a perceived object could be better determined and enrich our present view. Kelly's general argument thus relies on the following two claims: (i) perception always involves an awareness of indeterminate aspects and (ii) our perceptions are always experienced as deviations from an optimal perception which would include these aspects and provide us with the richest, fullest view.

Kelly explains: "Merleau-Ponty's view of perception depends on the idea that the background of our perception of objects and their properties [...] must recede from view and yet functions everywhere to guide what is focally articulate."<sup>10</sup> In short, that which recedes from view and is indeterminate plays a normative role in my perception of things. The indeterminate horizon of experience serves as an orientation device of sorts, against which perceptual figures emerge. This partial indetermination (or absence) at the heart of any perception points to a possibility of fulfillment which hinges on the differential structure of perceptual experience. On Kelly's view, perceptual norms thus manifest themselves through the (kinesthetically) experienced gap left open by the alternance of determination and indetermination in experience.

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<sup>9</sup> As Samantha Matherne, "Merleau-Ponty on Style as the Key to Perceptual Presence and Constancy." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 55, no. 4 (Fall 2017) : p.693-727, argues, and although this question will not concern us, such a failure on Merleau-Ponty's part would prove problematic for the coherence and consistency of his account of perception. My main concern in what follows, however, does not touch directly on this question.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Kelly, « Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty », in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press), p. 74-110, here p. 76.

Although the author himself does not acknowledge it, reading as he does Husserl's position largely inaccurately throughout this paper, Kelly's preliminary outline of the normative structure of perception maps onto Husserl's own descriptions of the normative tension constitutive of object-perception. In what follows, however, it is Kelly's explanation for the way in which this experienced gap is cashed out in experience that should interest us. At first sight, I am very favorable to Kelly's insistence on the essential articulation between indetermination, embodiment and normativity in Merleau-Ponty's account. As both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have convincingly shown, embodied perception is situated and thus necessarily entails a limited perspective on the world. Moreover, as Kelly argues, some perspectives are more relevant than others, in proportion to their ability to disclose an object's relevant features in a better or worse way. Following Merleau-Ponty, Kelly holds that these different perspectives do not stand indiscriminately in everyday perception, and thus seeing things is always implicitly knowing how I could see them better. However, the problem with Kelly's view, as I take it, lies in his explanation of this normative dimension of perception. Although I agree with some of Kelly's claims, I take issue with what I consider to be the core argument of his paper and with the manner in which he proceeds to draw conclusions from Merleau-Ponty's text.

Let us go back, for now, to Kelly's sketching out of a merleau-pontian answer to the problem of property constancy. Put coarsely, the problem of property constancy concerns our ability to perceive a property as one and the same in spite of a variation in its system of appearances. In his explanation, Kelly first suggests we consider the specific role played by lighting in perception. As Kelly puts it, an object's 'real' colour, such as the constant colour of the table on which I write, is experienced "in a direct bodily manner"<sup>11</sup> as the norm from which my current perception is felt to deviate. However much the light I cast on this table varies, (e.g. when I open the blinds in the morning, or when I close my desk lamp at night), my various perceptions of its shade "necessarily [make] an implicit reference to [...] the colour as it would be better revealed if the lighting context

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

were changed in the direction of the norm.”<sup>12</sup> The ‘real colour’, in this case, is thus an indeterminately given optimal perception, which nonetheless serves to establish the perceptual norm against which my current view stands. It is part of my perception of the table on which I work, argues Kelly, that I implicitly know “in a direct bodily manner”<sup>13</sup> how the light should vary, how my body should move or how “the context should change”<sup>14</sup> to allow me to see its ‘real’ colour.

This explanation, however, proves insufficient to account for the problems of perceptual presence and object constancy. The first asks how we can perceive aspects of objects that are not immediately present in our perceptual field (i.e. when I perceive my laptop as having a backside when I am typing), while the second is a variation on the problem of property constancy as it applies to our perception of the unity of the perceptual flow of an object’s various profiles (i.e. knowing that my laptop is one and the same object as I move it around before my eyes). As Kelly explains, while I could hypothetically cast the optimal light on my table and see its ‘real’ colour, “there is no single point of view on the object that I could have that would reveal it maximally.”<sup>15</sup> (Kelly 2006 : 90) Put otherwise, while the norm that served to explain the phenomena of property constancy was intuitively *experientable* in ideal viewing conditions, the same does not seem to hold for three-dimensional objects in perception. The fundamentally embodied nature of perception foils any attempt to escape my point of view, and I can only ever see one of the object’s profiles at once. Kelly formulates the resulting problem in terms of access : given that our perceptions are always limited and indeterminate, what optimal perspective could give me a maximal grip on three-dimensional objects ? If the background features of experience really do play a normative role in our current perception, how are we to understand, in this case, the norm from which our perception is felt to deviate ?

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Kelly, « Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty », in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Kelly's answer to these questions is supported by a beautiful, and yet intricate passage from the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the introduction to Part One, Merleau-Ponty is reflecting on perception's ability to "come about from somewhere, without thereby being locked within its perspective."<sup>16</sup> Put coarsely, and following his illustration, his reflection amounts to the following interrogation: how can we take our perception of the house as we are walking up the street towards it to be a perception of the 'real' house? Is it not the case that every one of these situated perceptions as I am walking up the street cannot give me "the house itself"<sup>17</sup>, but rather only always one of its profiles at once? After rejecting the claim that "the house itself is the house seen from nowhere"<sup>18</sup>, given its blatant disavowal of the situatedness of embodied perception, Merleau-Ponty entertains a second proposition. As quoted by Kelly, Merleau-Ponty writes:

[To] see an object is to come to inhabit it and to thereby grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn toward this object. [...] Each object, then, is the mirror of all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities that are 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, 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.<sup>19</sup>

Kelly's explanation of object constancy and perceptual presence follows from just this passage and gives great weight to the idea of an optimal "view from everywhere"<sup>20</sup>. Although this was never made

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<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty", p. 92.



explicit by Merleau-Ponty himself, Kelly argues that this passage from the *Phenomenology of Perception* is the key to understanding the two problems previously left unsolved. Moreover, although the ‘house seen from everywhere’ is in no way “a view that I can have”<sup>21</sup>, its virtual possibility sets the norm against which my current perception of the house is measured. The view from everywhere is further defined by Kelly as that which “would give me a better grip on the object than any single point of view could”<sup>22</sup>, even though this grip is not a grip my body actually *could* have, but rather a view virtually constituted by the various objects that stand over and against the central object I am perceiving. Lastly, Kelly concludes that the real or constant thing in perception is the “maximally articulate norm against which every particular presentation is felt to deviate”<sup>23</sup> and “the background against which my perspectival presentation makes sense”<sup>24</sup>. In view of these conclusions, I take it that Kelly’s account of perceptual normativity suggests a notion of norms as set by experientially inaccessible optimal viewpoints, which our current perceptions can asymptotically strive towards, without however ever reaching them.

## 2. Some problems with this view

In her response to Sean Kelly’s text, Samantha Matherne raises two main lines of criticism. For the purpose of my argument, I will leave aside her convincing defense of the role of style in Merleau-Ponty’s account of object constancy and perceptual presence, and concentrate on the second aspect of her critique. As Matherne argues, one of the main concerns with Kelly’s argument is exegetical. I largely agree with Matherne that the passage on which Kelly’s argument relies, and which I have quoted at length above, is simply not meant to express Merleau-Ponty’s view. In true Merleau-Ponty fashion, the author’s argument in this section emerges through a discursive encounter with the pitfalls of both empiricist and intellectualist positions. Although Merleau-Ponty does rhetorically entertain the

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty”, p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

thought that the house itself could be the house “shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes”<sup>25</sup>, this hypothesis is rejected in its turn by the end of the chapter and the passage on which Kelly’s argument turns is eventually debunked.

Most surprising, however, is the inconsistency between Kelly’s acknowledgement of the constitutive role of an interplay between determination and indetermination in perception, and his reliance on a passage defending the possibility of a ‘fully realized’ and ‘translucent object’. Such a conception of the object, it appears, would amount to the objectivist’s ‘absolute positing’ of an object, which Merleau-Ponty equates with “the death of consciousness, since it congeals all of experience [...]”<sup>26</sup> In positing its objects as things that exist in-themselves, the objectivist loses “the origin of the object at the very core of our experience”<sup>27</sup> and causes us to “ignore the contribution we make through our embodied perspective.”<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding these factors, my main concern with Kelly’s argument is not primarily exegetical. After all, it could be that Kelly’s reading of this passage is accurate, in which case I would still argue that it provides us with an incoherent view on perceptual norms. The problem I thus take to be more important than defending Merleau-Ponty’s text is that of providing a phenomenologically sound account of embodied norms, as they emerge in the course of experience. As I hope to show, although perception strives towards richness and clarity, it does not do so aimlessly. On the one hand, I am only required a minimal awareness of my perceptual surroundings to find my glasses on the kitchen counter, for example. On the other, it seems clear that “more differentiation and more information is not necessarily positive or helpful [...] as it can turn the visible into something invisible.”<sup>29</sup> This point is made very clearly by Merleau-Ponty himself, as he explicitly harmonizes his claims regarding our striving for a maximum of visibility with a basic gestaltist principle of

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<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Samantha Matherne, “Merleau-Ponty on Style as the Key to Perceptual Presence and Constancy”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 4, p. 693-727, here p. 701.

<sup>29</sup> Doyon, M. (manuscript).

differentiation. That is to say, although “we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point”<sup>30</sup> on the thing perceived, perception is always a matter of equilibrium. Merleau-Ponty writes :

A living body seen from too close, and lacking any background against which it would stand out, is no longer a living body, but rather a material mass as strange as the lunar landscape, as can be observed by looking at a segment of skin with a magnifying glass ; and seen from too far away, the living body again loses its living value, and is no longer anything but a puppet or an automaton.<sup>31</sup>

The optimal perception, then, is to be found in the appropriate balance between background and foreground, between determination and indetermination or visibility and invisibility, where the perceived is still caught up with its living value, somewhere between the lunar landscape and the puppet.

In light of these preliminary shortcomings, another main concern I have with Kelly’s claim that “[the] view from everywhere [...] is the optimum perspective from which to view the object”<sup>32</sup> is the conclusions it might lead us to draw in regards to the limitations of embodied experience. Both for Husserl and for Merleau-Ponty, the situated character of perceptual experience does not hinder perception’s claim to see things, rather than ‘parts of things’ or mere ‘aspects of things’. Both philosophers are committed to the view that object-perception is not a conceptual reconstruction of singular profiles and that the perceived object is given immediately and in the flesh (*Leibhaftig*) through these profiles. The object’s hidden profiles are neither known nor hypothesized : in largely compatible ways, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty defend the view that these profiles form a *protentional* horizon of possible experiences and are given to the perceiving subject through the *if-then* structure of motor intentionality. If I move my body to the left, then new aspects of the house I perceive will be revealed.

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 355-356.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty”, p. 91.

While Kelly does speak of the subject's ability to "take up [other] points of view"<sup>33</sup> through a form of 'bodily readiness' near the end of his paper, this section does not clearly impinge on his conception of perceptual norms. Rather, Kelly maintains that our embodied perception of objects deviates from the optimal givenness of a 'view from everywhere'. In my view, Kelly's argument is misleading and suggests that perception's embodied nature still limits our grip on the world in a problematic way, which calls for the hypothetical resolution of an all-encompassing omniscient view. My concern is that however much he stresses the importance of embodiment for Merleau-Ponty, Kelly still gives credit to the view that embodied perception in itself is constitutively insufficient to generate perceptual norms and to account for our responsiveness to them. This view is ultimately problematic from a phenomenological point of view, given the centrality of embodiment for our being in the world. All things considered, I worry that Kelly's reading of normativity in Merleau-Ponty is phenomenologically untenable and operates with virtual norms that lose their traction on lived experience.

I believe that Kelly's omission of the essential role played by interest and temporality is a good starting point to help explain some of the serious difficulties his text amounts to. On the one hand, it seems that norms are fundamentally contextual, and emerge out of our practical engagement with specific projects. On the other, Kelly offers no explicit description of the temporal emergence of norms and speaks of the 'real colour', the 'real size' or the 'real object' as a pre-determined and fixed exogenous norm standing outside the course of experience, thus leaving aside a fundamental aspect of Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. In what remains of this paper, I will attempt to briefly sketch out a merleau-pontian account of embodied perceptual norms by way of the threefold significance of embodiment, interest and temporality for perceptual life.

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<sup>33</sup> Kelly, "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty", p. 100

### 3. Drawing out a new concept of norms

#### 3.1. *Situated norms : the role of interest*

Although Merleau-Ponty also draws on the notion of practical interest in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it should be noted that it was Edmund Husserl who first suggested a conception of optimality as relative to interest in §36 of the *Thing & Space* (1907) lectures, when he attempts to define the criteria of adequate perception. In Husserl's theory of perception, the incomplete givenness of the perceived thing always "refers to possibilities of fulfillment whereby the thing would come, step by step, to full givenness."<sup>34</sup> In view of this aim of optimal givenness, our body continuously makes sense of and optimizes the intentional relations that stand between us and our experiential field. However, while Kelly's argument suggests that the optimal perception against which my current perception is measured displays the richness and clarity of a 'view from everywhere', Husserl's conception of "[the] circle of maximum givennesses"<sup>35</sup> suggests otherwise<sup>36</sup>. Following Husserl's example, when I see a match box nestled between books on a shelf, the slight variations that my perception of it might undergo do not matter the least, in this context, to optimally perceive the match box *qua* match box. As long as it allows me to perceive "the thing precisely as an ordinary thing in the sense of any common interest of practical life"<sup>37</sup>, a varying number of appearances, regardless of the distance from which I stand

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<sup>34</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Thing and Space. Lectures of 1907*, trans. R. Rojcewicz (Dordrecht : Springer, 1997), p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Surprisingly, Kelly also quotes §36 of *Thing & Space*, but glosses over its central argument regarding the importance of interest for defining optimality. Instead, he quickly dismisses what he takes to be Husserl's intellectualism and writes : "This system of perspectival presentations, which Husserl sometimes also calls the 'circle of complete givenness,' is the 'real' object to which each perspectival presentation refers but which none by itself is able to present. It can be understood intellectually, although not presented perceptually, by imagining yourself walking around the object or by imagining it rotating before you. This cannot be Merleau-Ponty's view." (Kelly, "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty", p. 94-95)

<sup>37</sup> Husserl, E. *Thing and Space. Lectures of 1907*, p. 106.

or the lighting in the room, successfully fulfill my intention. However, Husserl adds :

If the interest changes, if perhaps some intimation in the appearance that previously counted as complete gives the interest a new direction, then the circle of completely satisfying appearances is transformed into an unsatisfying circle, and the differences in the appearance, which previously were irrelevant, may possibly now become very relevant.<sup>38</sup>

Husserl's point is quite intuitive : since a perception is always the situated perception of a subject shaped by habits, goals, expectations and an experiential past, the optimal norm of perception simply cannot be a fixed one. In perception, "a practical tendency toward the optimum"<sup>39</sup> moves us toward the satisfaction of these conditions, with "the interest [terminating] in the optimal givenness."<sup>40</sup> As Husserl would argue, the botanist's interest in a flower is different from my own when I pass a flower shop on my way to university. My interest in getting to university in time for a class, the poor knowledge I have of plant biology, or my sudden desire to coordinate a bouquet of hydrangeas for a friend would all play constitutively different roles in establishing the norm for an adequately meaningful perception of the flowers. As Steven Crowell recently argued, the epistemic value of perception hinges on its claim to provide us "access to the object as something"<sup>41</sup> and thus "it too must entail conditions of satisfaction that 'set up' (posit ; *setzen*) its object as a norm."<sup>42</sup> Husserl's important claim, however, is that these conditions are constantly amenable to a variety of practical interests.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers his concept of 'situation' to make a similar claim and assert the importance of interests to account for normativity in perception. In distinguishing

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<sup>38</sup> Husserl, E. *Thing and Space. Lectures of 1907*, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA : Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

between a ‘spatiality of situation’ and ‘spatiality of position’<sup>43</sup>, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the essential role played by situatedness in embodied experience and argues that the spatiality of the embodied subject is largely defined by the intentional projects towards which she gathers herself. The situation of her body, then, is marked by a body “polarized by its tasks, insofar as it exists toward them, insofar as it coils up upon itself in order to reach its goal.”<sup>44</sup> While her position determines the set of objective coordinates that a subject occupies in space, it does not give us the breath and scope of her intentional life, as it is defined by practical interests, bodily imperatives, skills and habits, affective moorings, and the likes. Through various forms of “bodily recognition”<sup>45</sup>, we attune ourselves to the “practical significations”<sup>46</sup> opened up by our situation and take up their meaning into our own. This is what I take Merleau-Ponty to suggest when he writes of the living value of things (be it a body under a microscope, or the mat of a boat I glimpse in the distance), and of the perceptual equilibrium it calls on us to reach.

Most importantly for the question that interests us, Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the notion of situation sheds new light on Kelly’s claim that “the view from everywhere, which is the optimal spatial context, is the view that would give me the maximum grip on the object (if I could have it).”<sup>47</sup> Against Kelly, it seems that Merleau-Ponty would hold that the maximal grip on the object is the type of grip on the world that allows me to walk down its streets, ride its trains, hold the hand of a friend, reach for a cigarette in my backpocket or distractedly skim through a book, as these situations all call forth different types of bodily responses. Perceptual norms, then, owe more to the subtle and dynamic coupling of our bodies with experiential cues in the world, than they do to the ideal standpoint of a view from everywhere.

More generally, this central aspect of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl’s analysis holds great importance for the question of normativity because it emphasizes the broad and narrow contexts in which

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<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, “The Normative Nature of Perceptual Experience”, p. 95.

perception unfolds, and the role they play in defining the quality of our perceptions. Perceptual norms are not abstract optimas of givenness which stand outside of the various horizons in which they function. In what remains of this paper, I will show that these norms are rather determined both by the unfolding of short term intentional projects (i.e. selecting flowers for a bouquet, reaching for my toothbrush, finding a missing sock) and by the fine-grained experiential weight our body schemas carry through time, allowing for a stable and coherent experience.

### *3.2. Emergent norms : the role of temporality*

In addition to being determined in part by the subject's practical and situated interests, norms present specific temporal features which Kelly's argument does not clearly address. To a certain extent, Kelly's point that the optimal context of perception is determined by our positing of a virtual 'view from everywhere' begs the question. In holding that norms are exogenous standards against which our perceptions are measured, one is still confronted to the problem and how and why they come to be established. In Kelly's view, norms are posited independently of our specific engagement with them and hold valid across different time scales. The house 'seen from everywhere' simply is what it is, independently of the constant ebbing and flowing of experience. Such a conception, however, is clearly incompatible with the conclusions I have drawn in the preceding section.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's work in *The Structure of Behaviour*, Maria Talero suggests we conceive of phenomenal settings as being fundamentally 'mercurial' and 'labile' environments characterized by their dynamic structure and emergent norms. In describing the particular setting of a football game, for example, she writes : "The 'workspace' of football [...] is precisely this complex and intricate experiential arena characterized by 'lines of force', 'sectors' and 'zones' that emerge as the play develops, which collectively function as normative parameters guiding each player's participation the flow of play [...]"<sup>48</sup> According to Talero, norms progressively emerge at the intersection of the player's intentions and the affordances of the

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<sup>48</sup> Talero, "The Experiential Workspace and the Limits of Empirical Investigation", p. 456.



experiential setting. They are “embedded in the very ‘flow’ of the play”<sup>49</sup> and constantly “vulnerable to reinscription.”<sup>50</sup> In such a view, perceptual norms are fundamentally permeable and are sensitive to past perceptions we retain, our experience of the present and our anticipation of the future unfolding of perceptual settings.

This mercurial aspect of perceptual norms is also what I take to be David Morris’ point in his discussion of perceptual illusions, which functions just as well to acknowledge the basic structure of our everyday perceptions. Against a traditional conception of illusions as ‘mistakes’, Morris suggests that the standards which allow us to conceive of some perceptions as illusions “[rely] on perspectives unavailable within illusory experience.”<sup>51</sup> As Morris argues, the vocabulary of illusion is merely a retrospective characterization which testifies to the ambiguous overlapping between past and present perceptual norms. In the course of everyday perception, various timescales and the perceptual norms they carry come into play. Norms thus emerge both on the micro-timescale of experience (as classic rubber hand illusions tellingly reveal), and on the larger timescale of evolution, as “a past within living behavior.”<sup>52</sup> They are both something “the organism brings along with it”<sup>53</sup> and a normative complex “modulated, and instituted by presently ongoing dynamics”<sup>54</sup>.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty introduces the famous case of the Muller-Lyer illusion, in which two segments of equal length are respectively represented with inward-pointing and outward-pointing arrows. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, saying that I am perceiving the length of the segments in a right or a wrong way defeats the purpose of accounting for our perceptual engagement

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<sup>49</sup> Talero, “The Experiential Workspace and the Limits of Empirical Investigation”.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> David Morris, “Illusions and Perceptual Norms as Spandrels of the Temporality of Living”, in *Normativity in Perception*, ed. Maxime Doyon and Thiemo Breyer (Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 75-90, here p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

with the illusion itself. The alternative, as Merleau-Ponty argues, belongs to a currently inoperable set of conceptual tools and thus requires that we introduce norms that are exogenous to our experience itself. Rather, the lines “are neither equal nor unequal”<sup>55</sup> and they stand in this compelling ambiguity until I actively attempt to resolve its tension. Of this ambiguity, Morris writes: “I have perceptual access to the Muller-Lyer figure only through my determinate body and habits, and that’s just the way it looks in virtue of my bodily-habitual engagement with it.”<sup>56</sup>

The perceptual norms we operate with thus also heavily draw on an experiential past of embodied skills and habits which open up the world for us in differentiated and normatively attuned ways. Only when we recognize the essential temporality of embodied perceptual norms can we begin to understand how they emerge from a deep-running engagement with the world rather than externally pre-determine this encounter. Much like our experiences of the world are in contact with the horizons of past, present and future interactions, perceptual norms are established within “temporally thick”<sup>57</sup> living dynamics.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I provided an analysis and criticism of Sean Kelly’s argument for normativity in perception, through the lense of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. I rejected both Kelly’s insistence on the idea of an optimal all-encompassing view from everywhere, and the impossible standards it sets for everyday perception. Instead, I suggested that our perceptions are context-sensitive and emerge in dynamic and labile environments through which our bodies attempt to find a proper equilibrium. To this end, I complicated Kelly’s claims by turning to the central role of (practical) interest and temporality at the most basic level of embodied experience. Although much remains to be said to establish a fully convincing account of perceptual norms, it should now be clear that

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<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Morris, “Illusions and Perceptual Norms as Spandrels of the Temporality of Living”, p. 77.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

my reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is incompatible with Kelly's argument for perceptual presence and object constancy. While I agree with Kelly that perceptual norms play an essential part in shaping our interaction with the world, I contend that his view still lacks some key considerations to offer a convincing account of both their emergence and their significance.

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