

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

by Robert S. Tragesser

Phenomenology is concerned with the analysis of the contents of consciousness and with the philosophic consequences of respecting, and of failing to respect, the integrity of the sense of those contents. (If metaphysics is concerned with the study of "entity qua entity," phenomenology is concerned with "appearing entity qua appearing entity.") The purpose of this paper is to give the reader a feeling for the subject and for its philosophic consequences, as well as to present the beginnings of a phenomenology of perception.

The principal significance that I see in attending carefully to the contents of our mind (to "phenomena") is this: our scientific theories contain elements whose presence is justified by sound, careful argument, and elements which are arbitrary, instituted on the basis of conventions, more or less fixed by fiat. Our theories are improved when we can supplant *conventions* by *reasons* (e.g., when we can replace hypotheses with proved or demonstrated propositions). The more we can replace arbitrary elements by fully reasoned elements, the sounder our theories will be.

The problem faced by anyone seeking to maximize his rational control over his theory by replacing convention by reason is that of *finding compelling considerations* making a difference. Phenomenology is interesting because the close analysis of the contents of one's mind or thought often yields such compelling considerations. The solution to deep intellectual problems of all varieties often depends upon a deeper analysis of such contents than anyone has previously given (e.g., Einstein's analysis of simultaneity, Brouwer's analysis of dimension).

In the following I present a phenomenological analysis of the *contents* of visual perception.

In his *Analysen zur Passiven Synthesis* Husserl made the following interesting remark: "die äussere Wahrnehmung ist eine beständige Präntention, etwas zu leisten, was sie ihrem eigenen Wesen nach zu leisten ausserstande ist. Also gewissermassen ein Widerspruch gehört zu ihrem Wesen."¹ And then:

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Jeder Aspekt, jede noch so weit fortgeführte Kontinuität von einzelnen Abschattungen gibt nur Seiten, und das ist, wie wir uns überzeugen, kein blosses Faktum: Eine äussere Wahrnehmung ist undenkbar, die ihr Wahrgenommenes in ihrem sinnendinglichen Gehalt erschöpfte, ein Wahrnehmungsgegenstand ist undenkbar, der in einer abgeschlossenen Wahrnehmung im strengsten Sinn allseitig, nach der Allheit seiner sinnlich anschaulichen Merkmale gegeben sein könnte.²

Visual perception by its very nature over-extends itself. It “finds” its object to be something which it can view in part, but never completely. We see “transcendent” objects, and having the character of being a seeing of something transcendent is an intrinsic characteristic of visual perception. Perhaps it is an oblique recognition of the seeming impossibility of removing such a characteristic from visual perception that gives G. E. Moore’s so-called “proof of the existence of the world” whatever force it might have. In any case, this characteristic of visual perception emerges quite soon in a phenomenological analysis of visual perception.

I find myself in a world which lies about me in every direction without visible discontinuity. A vast and complex array of things is displayed before me, an array that is only a very small part of the world. The things scattered about me are viewed from a perspective determined by my position and the direction of my glance. The things persist when I close my eyes. Although I can no longer see the things about me, I continue to be aware of being in their presence, for I am aware of my body and of the space about it, the space continuing outwards, encompassing and containing the things that I was looking at a moment ago.

Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am forever in the black adaphane. *Basta!* I will see if I can see.

See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end.

(From *Ulysses* by James Joyce.)

Joyce (or rather Dedalus) does not give an entirely correct description of what happens in experience when one closes one’s eyes. The world may vanish as something I am seeing, but I continue to be aware of the presence of the world about me, of being among visible things. But the description by Joyce does capture something that I am continually aware of, however dimly: the world persists independently of me.

All I need to do is to open my eyes and there are my study, the window, and, outside, the marsh stretching forth, intervening between me and the lake, the tops of sailboats gliding slowly above the trees. It is as though I am a window behind the window. Looking at what is there before me, I am almost passive, my body, my eyes, almost forgotten; for a moment it seemed as though I were no longer looking, seeing, feeling, but a self-less letting be. Often in visual experience the self fades into the background. Describing the scene one does not say “I saw . . .” but “There was . . .”, unless, that is, one seeks some

personal recognition or distinction for a scene which was displayed to him so impersonally: "I saw the pheasants toward the shore; you won't find them here, now."

This seems to be a faithful description of a most striking aspect of the ordinary experience of the world we find ourselves in. One is ordinarily oriented toward the things seen and not the seeing, toward the glimpsed and not toward the glimpse. We do have experiences which remind us, however, that the scenes displayed before us are not untinged by ourselves. We dimly realize that we contribute meanings to the scene, endow it with visible structures and relations, transgress its limits in order to sharpen the significance of what is present. This is revealed to anyone who has tried to reach a comprehensive understanding of what he is seeing, who has tried to order what he sees, to regiment the world, to reach beyond the immediately visible in order to grasp the universe.

It can be seen that perceptual experience contains an element of assurance and acceptance which cannot be defined, an "awareness" of the independence and persistence of what is seen. One of our problems is to reach an understanding of the element of acceptance or awareness through phenomenological description, by a more careful descriptive analysis of the contents of perception. The acceptance with which we usually greet that which is before our eyes is not *understood* by explaining it away (as if one could explain it away without first understanding it as it lies in our perception "before us"). To reduce this assurance to habit or the effect of naively compounded beliefs is, in effect, to begin to talk about something else. *If we reconstrued that acceptance or assurance as a bias in our neurons and, so to speak, lived that reconstruction, the world about us would become a phantom world.* Likewise, we fail to understand this element of assurance with all of its attendant characteristics, if, in a Cartesian vein, we seek grounds external to it, grounds which nevertheless purportedly give us that acceptance, and the world, back again.

Thus our perceptual experience is seen by the most superficial glance to contain an awareness of the independence and persistence of what is seen. An aspect of this can be described as "the irresistible being-there of the visible." (N.B.: The use of 'irresistibility' here and henceforth is intended to suggest "independence of my will"—the object has the character of being something I cannot will away or will to be otherwise.) Let me explore this by more careful description and reconstruction.

Reviewing examples of past experience, one finds that an awareness of the irresistible being-there of a visible thing is sometimes modified by doubts about and even rejection of the existence of the "thing." This is the case when I later discover that what I thought I saw simply was not what was in my line of sight. This suggests that one must speak of the "irresistible being-there of the visible" only relative to momentary visual acts. In what sense is it correct, then, to speak of "irresistibility" (of independence of my will)? That tree stands there

before me so plainly that if I arbitrarily denied it solely in the context of this momentary visual field, then I could deny everything within the perceptual field. To deny the "being-there" of the tree and to live through that denial would be to "explode" the world and "explode" myself, for I am equally plainly a part of the world. If I am to be open to a world, if I myself am not to evaporate into a wisp of metaphysical vapor, then I must respect the apparent cogency of my perceptions, however fleeting and corruptible that cogency might appear in the long view. "The irresistible being-there of that which is visible" is a content that visual experiences have. Any arguments universally denying such experiences this content demonstrate against themselves by their very denial. Such arguments show that either visual experience is not the concern of the arguments (despite the pretension to be making an argument about visual experience) or, at best, they reveal an incommensurability between the world of experience and the model or interpretation of the world of experience on which the arguments are based.

A clear phenomenological task is to describe, to understand, this irresistibility (this independence of will), to see clearly under what conditions it is to be found, to map the range of its necessary influence in the course of experience of the world, and to pinpoint where its modifications can originate. In this respect we should expect an understanding of what there is about the structure of perceptual experience that allows us freedom to construe the world, to regiment it, and to contribute meanings to it—and to understand the respects in which the structure of experience limits this freedom.

As I have been tacitly suggesting, one must distinguish between the content of a perceptual act and the *epistemological evaluation* of that act. Epistemological evaluation introduces a concept of an entity and then seeks to determine the cognitive worth of, say, visual perception as a foundation of knowledge of that entity. At least for a while, a visual act presents us with objects having the character of being there independently of our thoughts and perceptions of them (the objects have, as I have said, the character of being-there irresistibly). One can say that such a content is always misleading *only* if one has introduced a notion of an entity which is such that visual perception may always be construed as being misleading about such entities. This does not compromise the content of the visual perception, but rather utilizes it to secure whatever information about those entities one can get—however misleading. To return to the problem of the last paragraph, the way to understand the content of our visual perceptions and the limitations of that content is to introduce a multitude of concepts of entities and to determine how the contents of visual perceptions may be utilized in building up knowledge of those entities.

In his work on the philosophy of perception,³ Armstrong proceeds by introducing a series of concepts of objects (of immediately perceived objects and of mediately perceived objects, of phenomenal objects, of physical exist-

tents, and so on) and then seeks to determine whether or not perception can be construed as yielding perceptions of those objects. He does produce a kind of phenomenology to decide these matters; he presents (sometimes through extended arguments) what he claims are traits of visual perception, and then evaluates perception so understood in terms of those concepts of entities. What is important from a phenomenological point of view is this: visual perceptions are in a sense originary; they present us with objects. We must look to the perceptions to "see" what we have as given in the visual act. The contents of the phenomena must be fully understood before we can rightly introduce and hope fully to justify any concept as an adequate concept of the sort of object we visually perceive. The contents of the perceptions, because of their fundamental or originary character, strongly regulate how we may utilize our perceptions and what kind of theories we may introduce as explanatory elaborations of the objects we perceive.

Let us further examine the structure of visual acts.

I find proclaimed as present before me in a field of vision not only the things scattered before me, but the being-there, the being-around-me, of the world. Just as irresistible as the being-there of the visible things is the being-there in the world. The things scattered about me have the character of being things in the world. I cannot think of them without some reference to the world. I find that every visual act is not only a seeing of things, but a glimpse of the world as well, for an invariant character of a visual act's having the character of being a seeing of something is that it is also a glimpse of the world.

Further inspection shows that the world as manifested in visual experience always has the character of being "*the* world." As I walk around the trees and the scene changes, the old and the new visual fields are related to one another as being glimpses of "the same world." The function of this aspect of visual acts, namely, that they are glimpses of "the world," is to unite the different scenes and to give them continuity. Our freedom to construe, to regiment, to order the world, seems to originate in this character of being glimpses of the same world which unites our visual experiences, for "the world" is greatly underdetermined with respect to visual perception. Of course it is not this character alone which unites our visual experiences. We often *see that* this scene is another one viewed from a different perspective, or that *this* is how things look on the other side of the woods. It seems that our understanding of different scenes as being glimpses of the "same world" is simply a reflection of relations between scenes that we can keep track of or see as we move about. But this is not quite the case, for, transported while asleep to a strange place, our first reaction upon opening our eyes is likely to be, "Where in the world am I?" That is, our sense of ourselves as being in the world does not always originate in our making spatial connections between where we are now and where we have been.

Let us now review the invariant features of perceptual experience thus far isolated—although I do not claim that I am absolutely certain that these are invariant features of perceptual experience. I do claim that they are temporarily good approximations of such features, subject to *considerable* refinement and modification.

Here are two such proposed invariant features of visual perceptual experience:

- (I*) Every visual perceptual experience involves a presentation of something which has the character of being there irresistibly, relative, at least, to the momentary perceptual act.
- (II*) Every visual perceptual act has the character of being not only a perception of things, but of being a perception of “the world” as well.

The trait (II*) serves to unite different perceptual acts. Although the relation of perceptual acts can sometimes be seen (e.g., “I see that this is just the other side of the tree I was looking at a moment ago”), these features can not be entirely reduced to the observation of such relations, as I have noted above.

Let us now continue examining the contents of visual experiences, investigating their structure with greater attention to detail. (I*) and (II*) will guide us in our further studies.

I am looking at a rabbit; it has the character of being there irresistibly (i.e., independent of me or any other experiencing and thinking subject). Despite the fact that parts and features of the rabbit are hidden from view, there is something clearly correct and compelling about my claim “I see a rabbit.” It would be not only strange, but faithless to the content of my visual act, if I never indulged in such direct idiom, but always said only things like “I see a rabbit-like surface and shape.” The indirect idiom implies a shallowness of experience, as though one were seeing the world through a fog or smoked glass. But the rabbit, and not simply its shape and surface, *is there* in my field of vision (such is the irresistible content of my experience). The oblique idiom, while not involving one in falsehoods, is nevertheless misleading about the sense of the contents of our visual perceptions—what we see are not simply surfaces, but surfaces *of things*.

These remarks suggest that the proper description of any momentary field of vision will not be a description of surfaces and shapes, but of an area laid out in the world, a vaguely bordered area within which is typically found an array of things. I look toward the marsh and the lake. My field of vision is bounded by myself, the distant horizon, the sky, the marsh, and the lake. It includes all of the things in that area. Does this description include too much? Indeed, in what sense can I claim that all of the small things out there which are hidden from view are in my field of vision? I had observed that it was correct for me to say “I see the rabbit” even though some parts of the rabbit were hidden from view. I must likewise say that the marsh is visible, and the

marsh includes insects and plant life which are not visible but which are there just as surely as the tree has parts which are hidden from me.

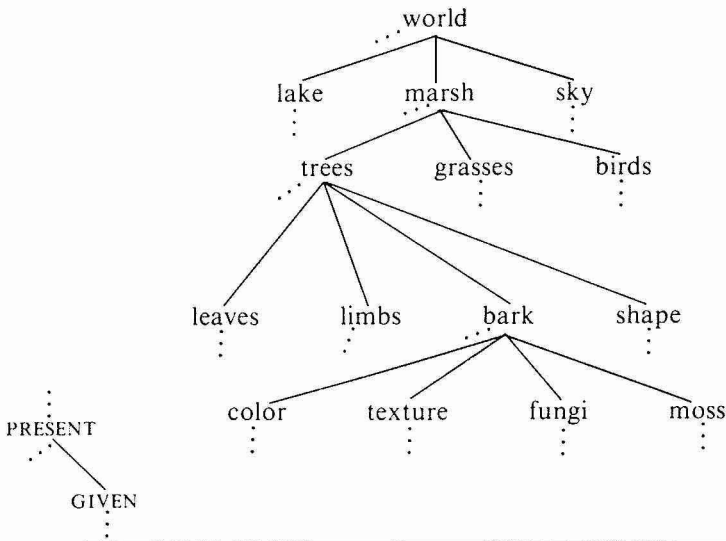
I want to say that the rabbit, the tree, the marsh, are visible, that I truly see them, that I see them but much of them is hidden from view. It is clear that in any act of seeing we must distinguish the things which have the character of being there from those aspects or parts of the things which are *not* hidden from view. The things which are in my fields of vision I shall place under the rubric 'what is present.' What is not hidden from view I will place under the rubric 'what is given.' The problem raised in the last paragraph is now solved by dividing the elements of my visual field into those which are given and those which are present. We now have the problem of investigating this distinction (which is imposed upon us by *the character or sense of the content* of visual experience as viewed from our phenomenological standpoint).

I will now explore the distinction between the present and the given in order to strengthen it. Consider table 1 and figure 1, which present, respectively, examples of the dynamics of the distinction.

TABLE 1

PRESENT	GIVEN
world	lake
	marsh
	sky
	:
marsh	trees
	grasses
	bushes
	birds
	:
tree	leaves
	limbs
	bark
	:
bark	fungi
	moss
	color
	texture
	:

FIGURE 1



Under 'Givens' I have listed things not themselves given in their entirety. Each of the objects mentioned under 'Givens' can then be placed under 'Presences,' for they are present and not entirely given. The objects under 'Presences' have certain aspects which are in turn *given*. Consequently, these given aspects can be listed under 'Givens.' This procedure can be reiterated when I transfer something given to the left-hand side of the *table*; the things present next time around become more superficial, shallower. This process of transfer is represented in figure 1. Think of figure 1 as an upside-down tree. As we reach the outermost branches, the objects increasingly approximate the surfaces of the field of vision. We might, therefore, try to define "pure givens" (= something like Peircean "Firsts," or, *perhaps*, Husserl's *hyle*) as a kind of mathematical limit of this branching tree. Some types of empirical philosophy might hold that such a limit exists. Some sort of imagined limit-process such as this is perhaps what those empiricists who tried to resolve the passing show into a parade of "sense data" had in mind. Let us consider what hinders isolating the "pure givens." As we move to the outer branches of the tree, our language becomes more refractory; increasingly delicate invention is called for. Inevitably, the delicacy of givens must outstrip the power of language—a problem arises concerning an effective definition of the actual limit. More directly, the further out we go the more we lose the capacity to observe and distinguish certain features on the surface of the things, features whose presence we are nevertheless aware of. I have in mind slight differences in colors and texture, of shapes and the like. But these reasons for the non-existence of "pure givens"

aside, we must contend with the following observation: we can never find a given which is free of an element of "presence," at least not in perceptual experience. The bark is always the bark of the tree, color the color of the bark, and so on.

These considerations lead to the following point, which seems to be a faithful account of the invariant structure of the (sense of the) givens of our visual field—all that is given is inseparable from the objects which are present in that field (where do you apply the scalpel?). There is no ground of separation, no outer limit of that field which might be called the "pure givens." Precisely because the givens always have the character of being an inseparable part of some presence transcending givens, we find ourselves in, we are aware of being in, and we are aware that the things scattered about us are in a world, "*the world.*" The qualitative contrast between the given and the present which pervades our visual act is an essential component of the irresistible being-there of the visible, i.e., the sense of a presence outstripping the givens is one of the roots or origins of that "irresistible being there." Without givenness there could be no manifestation of presence. Without presence, givenness would be at best something ephemeral, fleeting and superficial, as well as mind-dependent in some sense favorable to strong idealism. Without the element of presence, the experienced world (if there could be such a thing for us without the element) would have the character of being a phantom world, an undulating and continually changing subjective flux.

Without the tension between the given and the present, our visual field would collapse, we would no longer be aware of ourselves as being given a glimpse of things in a world. This suggests that there is a reason for our not being able to make between "given" and "present" an exact distinction in the context of visual experience. The successful sharp distinction of what is given from what is present would destroy the urgency or irresistibility of the presence of something more than is "given."

(I*) and (II*) above—the purported invariant features of visual acts—can now be modified as follows. Every visual act involves:

- (I) something which has the character of being present,
- (II) something given which has the character of being an aspect of what is present, and
- (III) the being-present of "*the world.*"

By way of achieving further illumination of the relations among (I), (II), and (III), consider a series of visual acts. As we have seen by an inspection of arbitrarily selected visual acts, each is a glimpse of the world. Indeed, the invariant content of visual experiences is that they are a glimpse of "the mylar tape which can be sufficiently far apart in time and sufficiently different in content it is a difficult problem, if not always an unsolvable problem, to see

clearly how the contents of the visual acts are related to one another as being parts of "the world." This suggests that the invariant content of the visual acts described under (III) above is not derived from our actually seeing or observing a relation among things in visual fields sufficiently distinct that the relation shows that they are parts of the same world. The sense of the experience to the effect that they are different parts of the same world must therefore have originated in an awareness of some other kind than the awareness of the things and the places which are actually seen.

Figure 1 suggests that "the world" as it is present in experience is of a different order from other entities which are present. It does not function as the given features or parts of any other transcendent presence. The world is never brought into a visual field. It is rather the point of convergence of all branches as we move back up the tree of givens to presences. It is possible to continue indefinitely this backward process along branches toward a point of convergence (viz., "the world") without ever arriving there.

I certainly have no more than touched the surface of these matters, but enough has been said to make some general comments about the significance (or potential significance) of these observations for understanding conditions on theory formations in in the natural sciences.

As we look at the sun at various times during the day, what is *given* is the shifting of the position of the sun, seemingly tracing an arc across the sky. But we know that what is present in the manifestation of change of position is not the movement of the sun but the rotation of our planet. The awareness of what is present (where the awareness of something being present is essential for us to experience the world visually) is altered through thought and further experience. Consider another example. This old oaken desk is present to me. However, we have "learned" that while the wooden desk is given, a bundle of molecules is present. Because they are so present, they are also in some sense given. The important problem is to trace phenomenologically the path or paths through experience to such modifications of the original naive sense of what is present. *This would not be a historical study*, but a phenomenological study of the possible paths through experience and the nature of those paths which are such that if they are actualized, then a transformation of the kind that interests us would be achieved. The point is that in order to solve the natural-scientific problem of what is truly present, as one travels along this path with its modifications and extensions of the content of past experiences, some element of presence, especially the presence of "the world" must be preserved. It cannot be preserved by mere hypothetical positing. Rather, there must be a continued element of genuine presence, an irresistible being-there in the external field of experience. Without this sense of continuity there would be gaps which would leave us at a loss to say in what sense the final theory (Earth rotates, matter is molecular) describes "the world." Arbitrary or speculative elements would intrude. This is precisely a theme of Husserl's *Crisis of the*

European Sciences; most especially, Husserl's (and Langrebe's) *Erfahrung und Urteil* develops the groundwork of a "logic" for the development of scientific theory which systematically takes into account and preserves the element of presence (qua levels of "judgment") as one proceeds in one's cognitive inquiries.

The "world" presented in visual perception is, in part, what Husserl spoke of as "the lived-world." It is the starting point of natural science, the constant and continued element of "presence" which must be preserved. Husserl speaks of the "lived-world" as "the forgotten meaning-fundament of the natural sciences" and as the limits or "horizon of all meaningful induction," as limits on the utilization of perception (see above for the sense of using the word 'utilization') in the achievement of "knowledge."

We have seen how "the world" is presented in perception with the concrete object of perception. We have also seen how it is a peculiarity of the presentation of the world that its presentation is a condition on recognizing an experience as a perception of something, and that its presentation does not seem to be bound up with previous perceptions—one does not have to trace a connection between contents to be assured that one is seeing "the world." This trait of perception is not derived on the basis of an epistemological evaluation of perception, but rather is fundamental to the contents of perception. This suggests that what we may rationally (compellingly and insightfully) count as an experience of "the world" is not bound by an essence, but that the element of "presence" which we count as the presence of the world in our perceptions may be pursued along different paths with quite different theories resulting, and yet those theories could all have the character of being theories—good theories—of "the world." That is, we must be very careful not to treat "the world" as a thing writ large. "Nature" is something quite different from any object we might find *in* nature. It is essentially fuzzy (or underdetermined) so that it can be essentially there in our ordinary perceptions and in our theory-laden and modified perceptions resulting from theoretical penetration to deeper "presences," from a shifting and deepening array of perceptual givens, as chairs give way to molecules and as molecules give way to high-energy mysteries.

NOTES

1. Edmund Husserl, *Analysen zur Passiven Synthesis* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. D. M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).