

Phenomenology

Introduction

What do we perceive? An obvious answer would be that we perceive a specific physical object—for example, this cup. Yet, what if, rather than beginning with this answer, we actually turned to our perceptual experience and tried to describe what we perceive? We might think that we already have a good grasp of our perceptual experience; it is, after all, *our* perceptual experience. We might think, then, that we already know what the results of such a description will be and that there is no need for us to actually give it. Moreover, we might think that since we already know what our experience is like, those who do give a description are unnecessarily complicating what is already evident. The project of phenomenology, the philosophical method pioneered by Husserl, is just such a description of experience and, in fact, such a description, far from being a simple repetition of what is already obvious to us, is in fact a revolutionary transformation within our experience.

Husserl and Intentionality

In what Husserl, in his groundbreaking work *Ideas*, calls our “natural attitude”—the attitude we normally adopt in our everyday life—we take our consciousness of physical objects for granted.¹ We assume that the things we perceive first exist independently of our consciousness of them, and we assume that their existence in themselves explains our awareness of them, their existence “for us.” This line of thinking often leads us, then, to think that we are actually conscious of “mental representations”—cognitive constructions we make based on the sensory stimulation produced

in us by things in the world. In fact, though, a careful description of our perceptual experience reveals that the things we perceive cannot be equated with such mental representations, objects that are, by definition, distinct from real objects. Though everything we are conscious of is indeed relative to us, inasmuch as it is by definition the object of our experience, everything we are conscious of is not *merely* relative to us. The categories of the “in-itself” and the “for-us” are in fact not mutually exclusive and thus being “for-us” does not necessarily mean being “in our minds” rather than “in the world.”

Husserl argues that we must put aside the question of whether the things we perceive correspond to the “reality” that we presume to be independently defined and independently existent and begin, instead, by simply describing the things we perceive. If, for example, I look out the front window of my house, I see my neighbor’s house. Yet this is inadequate as a description: I do not simply see my neighbor’s house. In fact, I see my neighbor’s house *across the street* and *in the midst of some trees*. While I may not usually notice that, in addition to the house, I also see a street and trees, I would certainly be surprised if I looked out my window and saw the house across a river or in the midst of a city. Moreover, I can, upon reflection, realize that while I could see this house in a different place, surrounded by different things—if it were lifted from its foundation and moved to another site—I could never see it in no place, surrounded by nothing.² In other words, I cannot see just one thing. If I am seeing one thing, I must be seeing other things as well; I can only see one thing surrounded by other things.

Our description still needs further refinement, however. It is true that I see both the house and the street, but when I am looking at the house across the street I do not see the house *in the same way* that I see the street. The house “stands out,” and I see it quite determinately. I barely notice the street and trees, though, and I see them much less determinately. Just as I do not ever see only one thing but, instead, see one thing surrounded by other things, I also do not ever see all things equally determinately or prominently. Instead, I see some things more determinately and more prominently than others.

I am not, however, restricted to seeing the house more determinately than the trees. After all, a branch on one of the trees can suddenly catch my eye, and I can see the tree as determinately as I saw the house before and, simultaneously, see the house as indeterminately as I saw the tree before. When this occurs, I see the tree *as* always having been as I

see it now, although in fact it was not fully determinate in my perception prior to my attending to it. In other words, neither the determinateness nor the indeterminateness of the things surrounding the house is permanent. Instead, the indeterminateness is one that can be made more determinate, an indeterminateness that is potentially determinate: I can come to see and, indeed, may already have seen, determinately what I now see indeterminately. Similarly, just as I come to see determinately what I previously saw indeterminately, I come to see indeterminately what I previously saw determinately. This variability in what, within my perception, is determinate and what indeterminate is constitutive of all of my perceptual experience: in short, perception always has a structure of “figure and background.” In Husserl’s language, we would say that to see one thing, this one thing must have an “outer horizon”:³ it must be surrounded by other things, things that have, he says, a “determinable indeterminateness”—an indeterminateness that *would* become determinate were I to make it the focus of my attention.⁴

We can go still further in describing our experience precisely and accurately. Just as I do not see only my neighbor’s house but, instead, see my neighbor’s house as a figure against a ground of a street and trees, my seeing of the house itself is also not simple. I never have the whole house in my actual experience; instead, I always see the house from this side or that: in Husserl’s language, I see it “in profile” or through an “aspect” (*Abschattung*).⁵ Just as we do not typically notice the other things that contextualize our perception of an object, so do we not usually notice that we do not see the whole of the thing we perceive. This recognition that what we perceive is perceived as “in profile” has significant implications.

As I walk around a table, for example, I continue to see *the same* table even as specific parts of the table come into, and then pass out of, view. Similarly, I continue to see the table as having *the same* color, even as certain parts of the table are bathed in light and other parts are hidden in shadow; Husserl writes, “The same color appears ‘in’ continuous multiplicities of profiles of color [*Farbenabschattungen*]. Something similar holds for other sensuous qualities and also for every spatial shape. The one, same shape (given ‘in person’ as the same) appears continuously but always ‘in a different manner,’ always in different profiles of shape [*Gestaltabschattungen*].”⁶ Thus, typically, I would say, “I see the house,” not, “I see the front of a house,” and, indeed, we do perceive the house *as* a whole, even though we only actually perceive a profile. In other words, we precisely see the house—or any object—*as* exceeding our perspective

upon it: we see the object *as* something real. If we describe our experience carefully and accurately, we must acknowledge our experience has the form of *presenting* us with real objects, objects we experience *as* exceeding our experience of them.

To be conscious of a thing as in profile is to be conscious of this thing as being irreducible to our consciousness of it. We are conscious of the things we perceive as offering more to consciousness than we are conscious of. This “more” is not, however, another thing beyond the thing that we perceive. Husserl stresses that the things we perceive are not mere signs of a “real” thing that we do not perceive; “The spatial physical thing which we see is, with all its transcendence, still something perceived, given ‘in person’ in the manner peculiar to consciousness. It is not the case that, in its stead, a picture or sign is given. A picture-consciousness or a sign-consciousness must not be substituted for perception.”⁷ Instead, this “more” is more of the thing that we already perceive.

That we are conscious of the things we perceive *as* these particular things rather than other particular things entails that, analogously to the way in which the tree and the street are “on the horizon” of the perception of the house, so are the further profiles of the thing “on the horizon” of whatever profile we are actually experiencing. Husserl refers to this horizon of further profiles as the “inner horizon” of a thing.⁸ The thing itself, like the world surrounding the house, offers itself to our perception as a “horizon of determinable indeterminateness”⁹; this indeterminateness, Husserl writes,

necessarily signifies a determinableness which has a rigorously prescribed style. It points ahead to possible perceptual multiplicities which, merging continuously into one another, join together to make up the unity of one perception in which the continuously enduring physical thing is always showing some new “sides” (or else an old “side” as returning) in a new series of profiles [*Abschattungen*]. . . . The indeterminacies become more precisely determined.¹⁰

The horizons that are constitutive of the object of our perception are thus not further *objects that* we perceive. They are, rather, the *immanent meaning of* all of the things that we perceive. When I look out at the ocean, for example, I do not see the ocean as having a horizon in the way that I see the ocean as being choppy or calm: the perceptual horizon is not one

more empirical “attribute” of the ocean. Rather, I see the ocean as having a horizon insofar as I am *implicitly conscious of the ocean as* continuing to exist beyond what I see of it.¹¹ The house that I perceive, then, is not itself “contained” within my experience of it; it is, rather, the essential meaning that defines all my perspectival experiences of it, a meaning that is precisely given as exceeding the finite terms of those limited experiences.

Like the figure-background structure, the horizon structure is not a contingent feature of some perceptions, but it is the very form of our experience of objects as such: “[I]t is evident and drawn from the essence of spatial physical things . . . that, necessarily a being of that kind can be given in perception only through a profile [*Abschattung*].”¹² Thus, when Husserl describes physical objects as “transcendent”¹³ to consciousness, he is not claiming that the things we are conscious of as physical objects first exist independently of our consciousness of them, as we presume in the “natural attitude”; he is rather describing the way in which these things exist *within* our experience.

Consciousness, then, is not a container for a collection of “mental representations.” Instead, consciousness is, in Husserl’s language, “intentional”: it is the very presenting of some defining object; “the word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness *of* something.”¹⁴ In the case of perceptual consciousness, the meaning of this defining object is that it exceeds our experience of it.¹⁵ Perceptual consciousness is always “of” a “transcendent” object.¹⁶

It is by describing what we perceive *as* objects of consciousness that we can recognize that what we perceive are real things rather than mental representations. In the introduction to part 1 of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “we must come to understand how, paradoxically, there is *for-us* an *in-itself*.”¹⁷ Husserl has shown us that there can be an in-itself that is for-us precisely insofar as our perceptual consciousness is “intentional”—always “of” an object that is given with the meaning that it exceeds our experience of it. To refer to what we perceive as an in-itself for-us is not to fall into contradiction but, instead, to offer a careful description of the “horizon of determinable indeterminateness” that defines perceptual experience. We are conscious of something *as* real, rather than *as*, for example, imagined or illusory, precisely because we are conscious of it *as* present to us in profile.

To be a perceptual consciousness, to be a consciousness that takes the form of a perspective, is to be a consciousness that always tacitly

recognizes itself as being *one* of many possible consciousnesses of what we perceive rather than being *the* consciousness of what we perceive. Thus, although what we perceive is always what we are conscious of, this does not preclude us from being conscious of things that exist “in the world” rather than “in our minds.” Indeed, it is perceptual consciousness’s tacit recognition of itself as a perspective—its tacit recognition of its consciousness of what we perceive as only one way out of many possible ways to be conscious of what we perceive—that insures there is a kind of objectivity within subjectivity. Insofar as we are consciousnesses of objects in profile rather than consciousnesses of objects in full, we are not trapped in our minds with no access to anything beyond our own thoughts or “representations.” Instead, we are engaged with a real world that constantly calls on us to perceive it more adequately. As Husserl writes, what we perceive “calls out to us, as it were . . . ‘There is still more to see here, turn me so that you can see all my sides, let your gaze run through me, draw closer to me, open me up, divide me up; keep on looking me over again and again, turning me to see all my sides.’”¹⁸ In the experience of the inner and outer horizons of what we perceive, we experience what we perceive as imposing a norm upon us; these horizons “prescribe a rule for the transition to actualizing appearances.”¹⁹ In perceptual experience, it is we who answer to the world as much as the world that answers to us. Moreover, not only does what we perceive call on us to experience it more fully, but it also calls on us as *bodies*; it calls on us, that is, in our capacities for moving and grasping.²⁰ The object of our perception presents us with a sort of norm—a “call” or imperative—and it is a norm that we answer to behaviorally, that is, in a worldly, “embodied” manner and not simply in a “mental,” imaginative manner.

Husserl has shown that our experience is a *presentation* of the world, not a *representation*, and thus our experience—the “intentionality” of consciousness—is inherently “objective” rather than “subjective” in that it is always already occupied with a reality that is given as transcending it. At the same time, however, inasmuch as a contribution on our part is involved in perceiving the world adequately, the object of our experience cannot simply be understood as one-sidedly determining our perception. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is particularly powerful in exploring the nature of this, our contribution to our perceptual experience. In *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception presents, rather than represents, the world to us.²¹ The world we perceive is not the *image* of an already given world, but,

at the same time, the world thus perceived is an original and meaningful achievement. In this way, perception is as much *expressive of* a subject as it is *responsive to* an object.²²

Merleau-Ponty and Embodiment

It is the perceptual subject's existence—*our* existence—as a body that is Merleau-Ponty's primary focus: in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes, “[W]e are in the world through our bodies, and . . . we perceive the world with our bodies.”²³ The bodily character of our perception is itself constitutive of the meaning and form of our experienced world. The stairs I perceive outside my office, for example, can only be stairs, can only be a way of entering or exiting the building, for a being who can walk up and down them—a *moving* being.²⁴ It is not, therefore, because I perceive the stairs that I am able to walk down them; rather, it is because I am able to walk up and down them that I perceive them as stairs. “Stairs” is a possible meaning—a possible *reality*—only for a moving being.

Furthermore, the perception of the stairs as such is itself accomplished *in walking*. As we considered above, it is common for us to imagine perception to be an exclusively sensory, “cognitive” matter. A description of our perception of stairs, however, must acknowledge that it is fundamentally a *practical* rather than a *theoretical* activity. It is something we *do* in and through our motor behavior, rather than being a separate activity of reflective contemplation. The core of this phenomenological insight is found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's description of our experience as “being-in-the-world” (*In-der-Welt-sein*) emphasizes that we do not usually experience the things that surround us as a collection of objects that we neutrally observe; rather, we normally experience the things that surround us as the medium and means for the realization of our projects.²⁵ Such things are experienced as “ready to hand” (*zuhanden*), and our normal engagement with these “ready” things does not require our explicit attention. Thus, to use Heidegger's example, when we are engaging with a hammer *as* a hammer—that is, when we are *using* it—we do not focus on the hammer but, instead, on whatever we are building with the hammer. Precisely because the things with which we are practically engaged do not require our explicit attention, we often overlook our practical

engagements with things when we attempt to account for our experience of the world and, instead, focus only our theoretical engagements. In fact, though, Heidegger notices, it is typically only when useful things break down that we experience the things of our everyday, practical environment as “objects”: if the head of the hammer falls off in the midst of our hammering, our attention is drawn to the hammer itself; in that case, though, we precisely experience it as broken, which is to say that what was its defining perceptual character has in fact been lost. This is the insight behind Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description of the embodied character of our perception.

It is in and through our “doing” that we typically grasp the world, and this “doing” is first and foremost a bodily matter. Behavior is perceptive, and this means we live the meanings of our world first as bodily comportments rather than mental ideas.²⁶ Indeed, it is largely for this reason that the phenomenological description of our experience can be educative and, indeed, transformative: our perception is not first and foremost a matter of theoretical cognition, that is, we are not automatically reflectively cognizant of the perceptual significance that defines our bodily comportment towards the world. As I am writing these words, for example, my feet, legs, and arms are touching the floor, chair, and table, keeping my body upright and stable so that I am able to write. My attention, however, is not on my bodily behavior—not even on my fingers depressing the keys on my keyboard—but on the ideas that are materializing through my typing. Typically, our bodies handle most of the things they interact with so competently that we generally do not explicitly notice these worldly interactions. It is nonetheless true, of course, that it must be *I* who am typing, and thus I am not *unaware* of my body. This inexplicit, lived sense of one’s acting body is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “body schema” (*le schéma corporel*).²⁷ When one is acting, one does not have an “objective” *cognition* of the empirical details of one’s body, but has, rather, a lived sense of how to deploy it—an implicit sense of one’s determinate powers for bodily engagement that are “at the ready,” powers that will rise to meet the demands of our projects as the unfolding of those projects call them up, as the sting of the mosquito on my shoulder, for example, calls forth my hand to address it, generally without my even noticing it.²⁸ In this sense, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can.’”²⁹ We are, for the most part, focused on the projects sustained by our bodies rather than on our bodies themselves, and we will very

likely not be explicitly aware of the specific movements in and contact with the world that our bodies make as we are carrying out our projects.

Describing this behavioral, perceptual significance that defines our everyday reality but that typically eludes our explicit attention adds a further layer of significance that brings us back to the theme of our initial description of the contextual character of our perception of objects. As was noted above, Heidegger describes our experience as “being-in-the-world.” The significance of this description is that we do not first exist in isolation from the world we experience and only subsequently, following explicit deliberation, come into relation with it. Rather, we first exist in relation to the world; we are always already meaningfully engaged with the world. Husserl, defining our consciousness as “intentional,” drew our attention to the fact that consciousness does not exist in the abstract, but it is always “of” something. In describing our experience as “being-in-the-world,” Heidegger draws our attention to that fact that this “something” with which we are involved is a *world*, that is, the particular object, such as the hammer, with which I am involved is *itself* not a strictly separable thing, but is part of the fabric of a meaningful *situation*.³⁰

We noted above that the interruption of our practical engagement with the world makes the “ready” thing with which we were involved—the broken hammer—become objectively obvious to us. Beyond the thing itself, our larger project of practical involvement is made manifest in this interruption. We were not, for example, simply hammering for the sake of pounding nails. We were, instead, hammering in order to repair our front porch, we were repairing our front porch so that we could sit on the porch with friends the next night, and we aim to maintain and pursue those friendships for the sake of living a rich and fulfilling life. Though we often, I think, try to define our practical engagements quite narrowly, our practical engagements are not totally isolated from one another. Smaller projects—like repairing the front porch—contribute to larger projects, and these larger projects ultimately contribute to our overall project of living a meaningful life.³¹ We must recognize, therefore, that our behavior, that is to say, our *perception*, is an *existential* activity: it is our way of having a world.³² In comporting ourselves as we do, we are building a life for ourselves, and it is this life that is the true focus of perception. Thus, for example, in walking down the stairs, I am not just walking down the stairs but also leaving my office in time to make dinner for some friends: the stairs are my route home and my keeping of a commitment.³³ We are invested in what we perceive; it matters to

us as our way of making a living or being a friend. In making manifest these deeper layers of our life-projects, the breakdown of the ready thing, then, precisely offers us the opportunity to notice that we did not previously live the world as a neutral collection of objects. This is the point behind Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of the experience of a "phantom limb."

With the loss of a limb, as with the breakdown of a tool like a hammer, comes a sudden awareness of the limb's contribution to one's way of being-in-the world. In an obvious way, without a leg, I cannot walk, and without a hand, I cannot grab: my capacities for interacting with the world that confronts me are diminished when my body is damaged. The striking phenomenon of the "phantom limb," however, reveals that my bodily capacities are implicated at the even deeper level of *the very constitution of this world*.

"Phantom limb" experience is a well-documented phenomenon in which those who have lost limbs continue to experience feelings *in the* (absent) *limb itself*.³⁴ Further, this experience defies both physiological and psychological explanations: it cannot be a strictly "subjective," psychological phenomenon because the phantom limb experience can be diminished or eliminated by physiological means (such as cauterization or drugs); it also cannot be a strictly "objective," physiological phenomenon because the experience can be triggered by memories.³⁵ Rather than these categories that presume the separation of "subjective" and "objective," it is precisely the phenomenological notion of "being-in-the-world," Merleau-Ponty argues, that allows us to understand how the phantom limb experience is possible.³⁶

To understand the phantom limb, we must recognize that the amputation is fundamentally the loss of one's former way of being-in-the-world. With the loss of a leg, for example, the world as a domain in which I can walk is lost. Formerly, stairs, for example, as ready means of access to the building, immediately solicited the appropriate climbing behavior from me without my even reflecting upon it: I perceived the stairs, that is, in and as the bodily behavior of using them to enter the building. The experience of the phantom limb is the continuing experience of this solicitation from the world—a world that immediately calls forth from me the behavior of walking—in a situation in which in fact I can no longer walk. Moreover, these stairs were perceived not simply abstractly as "access to a building" but as access, for example, to the kindergarten classroom where I picked up my child at the end of the

day or to the laboratory where I was conducting research. The disruption of my existence as a walker, then, is the disruption of my existence as a parent or as a scientist. The smaller project of walking up a set of stairs is inextricable from my larger project of picking up my child from school, and this larger project is inextricable from my even larger project of being an involved parent or a respected scientist. The limb thus draws my life as a whole in its train, and its loss similarly puts that whole into question. My *world*, that is, summons forth from me a body that I no longer have. In the experience of the phantom limb, the amputee's body engages with the world only insofar as it can be lived in terms of the past that existed prior to the amputation. As Maria Talero writes, commenting on Merleau-Ponty's analysis, "If being-in-the-world is the way that we are always situated in a world of bodily projects or engagements, then the phantom limb is like a cut-away window onto this world. The visible limb has been lost, and what stands revealed is that current of meaningful involvement and bodily competence that previously ran through it and that continues to reside in the patient's world."³⁷ What this means is that the phenomenon of the phantom limb takes advantage of the habitual character of perceptual consciousness's intentional structure.

Each of our perceptual experiences is not disconnected from every other perceptual experience. Each experience is not immediately forgotten such that, with each experience, we encounter an entirely new world for which we must discover an entirely new perspective. Rather, our perception of the world has a certain continuity and stability to it. This continuity and stability, Merleau-Ponty argues, are rooted in our body's habits.

When I, for example, begin learning how to type, I do not immediately perceive the keyboard adequately. Grasping the keyboard will happen as it becomes "ready" for me, which will happen through my learning the bodily behavior of navigating the keys. My fingers, too, though, do not immediately take up the stance that will allow me to experience the keyboard as a tool for writing. To develop this behavioral "perspective," I must *learn* how to interact with the keyboard. I must at first focus intently on the movements my fingers are making and on the keys they are trying to hit, and I must practice this activity repeatedly. Yet, as I practice these movements over and over, my experience changes. Rather than continuing to focus on my fingers' movements and the keyboard, my focus gradually shifts from my fingers to that which I want to write. While learning to type, my fingers' interaction with the keyboard was

my project, and I had to pursue this project at the expense of any other project. Once I have learned to type, however, my fingers' interaction with the keyboard, rather than being my project, is, instead, in the service of some other project. I am no longer typing simply for the sake of typing: I am typing in order to write a letter or a book. I can properly type—properly interact with the keyboard—when I have developed the appropriate habit.

Thus, to form a habit is to discover—and then stabilize—a new perspective. Not only does a new habit free us up to perceive something else—if we develop a habit of sitting in a chair, for example, we can, then, read a book while sitting in the chair: a new habit also transforms how one perceives what one perceives. Once I learn to speak German, for example, the trips to Germany that I previously experienced as overwhelming become routine. Likewise, once I have learned to drive, places that I previously could only imagine traveling to become legitimate destinations. Furthermore, this new perspective serves as the foundation upon which yet other perspectives can be developed.

In addition to recognizing perceptual consciousness as embodied, therefore, we must also recognize perceptual consciousness as learned.³⁸ This learning, however, does not consist of simply perceiving more within an already acquired perspective: it is not just a matter of acquiring “information.” Rather, this learning consists of transforming the very form of our engagement with the world. In acquiring a habit, I become *committed* to responding to situations in a specific way. As habitual, perceptual consciousness has an impersonal aspect. Once we have developed a habit, a perspective that once required noticeable effort is achieved with so little notice that we no longer experience it as optional; our perspectives become, in a certain way, beyond our say. Indeed, we may find ourselves taking a certain perspective even as we make a real effort to take a different perspective. Thus, for example, I may find my hand reaching for my phone at dinner even after I have vowed not to check my messages while eating with my family. In acquiring a habit, we give up our immediate, present “control” of our behavior and, instead, give ourselves over to the form of relationship that was cultivated through our past. Our bodies, then, are not wholly absorbed into their present interaction with the world, but they carry within them a past in and through which the meaningful form of our world is fixed.

As habitual, our bodies continue to live in the past and are thus constantly selectively refusing to take up certain aspects of the present;

it is this “habitual body” that, Merleau-Ponty argues, is revealed in the phenomenon of the phantom limb.³⁹ An amputee can still feel as if she still has all her limbs because, as Talero writes, the “current of meaningful involvement and bodily competence” continues to run through the rest of her body and into the world.⁴⁰ She continues to perceive the world in terms of her projects; she continues, for example, to see a cup as graspable, for example, or stairs as navigable. Thus, the phenomenon of the phantom limb is a “breakdown” of the ready world that allows us to see that the very meaning of the world itself is inseparably united with the forms of our bodily involvement with it.

Each of the body’s actions aims at a way of life rather than just a particular object. These actions are *existentially* significant; they carry a world with them. Moreover, the body’s present mode of being-in-the-world is a continuation of or a deviation from the body’s prior mode of being-in-the-world. The body’s actions answer to the past and the future just as much as they answer to the present; they tacitly remember previous experience and anticipate further experience.⁴¹ To give an adequate description of our experience, then, we cannot only describe the things that are our focus. We must also describe the world in which it is these things, rather than others, that are our focus and in which these things assume their specific meaning. Whatever specific meaning things have for us arise within a larger context of meaning.

Russon and Polytemporality

In *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, Russon draws our attention to this larger context of meaning that informs all experience through a description of musical experience: specifically, he argues that the temporal structure of musical meaning is a powerful analog for the temporal structure of all experiential meaning. His analysis of music draws out the many non-thematic dimensions of experience that must be operative if we are to perceive the present sound—the note—as music. His analysis of these dimensions of musical experience provides a basic “logic” for understanding the larger structure of the world that contextualizes our everyday experiences.

“To receive music,” Russon writes, “is to dance. . . . Music calls the body: it stirs the body to move, and it is only in the body’s acceptance of this its transfigured status that the music is allowed to be.”⁴² In this

description of musical experience, Russon draws our attention to its propulsive character and to the body's implication in this character. Musical notes call on us to perceive them as music. That is, each note announces itself as in relation—rather than in isolation—from the others; each note announces itself as part of a project—the piece of music—that the other notes are also part of. To experience music, then, is to allow the notes to take us where they are going; it is to follow their lead. As Russon writes, “The music is real, but it cannot exist without the body's acts of preparation and realization. The music depends upon the body to allow it (the music) to be the causal force. Only within the anticipative openness of the body can the music realize its causal primacy, its authority.”⁴³ If we fail to follow the notes' lead, we may experience the notes, but we will not experience the music itself.

Russon refers to this felt momentum of one aspect of experience toward other aspects of experience as “rhythm.” All experience, and not merely musical experience, he argues, has rhythm in this broad sense: “It is this way that the body senses as a propulsion to fulfillment in further sense that I will call ‘rhythm.’”⁴⁴ That is, all experience is defined by temporal relations of expectation and resolution. The experience of pulling my car into the driveway, for example, is both the anticipation of a future experience of unlocking my front door and greeting my dog and a resolution of the past experience of driving down my street.

Russon argues that not only does musical experience draw our attention to the temporal relations of anticipation and fulfillment that are always at play in experience; it also draws our attention to three distinct ways that these relations are enacted in experience. “Our perception of rhythm in the broad sense reveals that our experience is always temporal, that is, it is always structured in terms of past (where we are coming from), present (where we are), and future (where we are going). What melody, harmony and . . . rhythm show us . . . is that this temporality is itself multilayered.”⁴⁵ Each of these three dimensions of music—melody, harmony, and rhythm—has, he argues, a distinct temporal significance: the temporality of rhythm, Russon argues, is of a “*punctuated repetition*” of sounds, the temporality of melody is of “the unfolding of a *coherent sequentiality*” of sounds, and the temporality of harmony is one of a “*simultaneity of the resounding*” of sounds.⁴⁶ Furthermore, each of these distinct temporalities gives music a distinct layer of meaning. The repetitive regularity of the sounds that constitute the rhythm of a piece, Russon writes, has the meaning of a “platform” upon which the

sounds that constitute the melody and harmony are “*established* and by which they are *supported*.”⁴⁷ The progressive development of the sounds that constitute the melody provides the piece’s “narrative.”⁴⁸ Finally, the resonance of the sounds that constitute the harmony provides the piece’s “character.”⁴⁹ All experience, and not simply musical experience, Russon argues, is defined by the distinct and yet interrelated temporalities of melody, rhythm, and harmony and by the basic meanings of narrative, platform, and character that these distinct temporalities enact. Let us now explore how this is so.

When I meet a friend for coffee, he and I talk of the events of the day or our plans for the summer. Though these topics are the explicit focus of our conversation—its “melody”—there is a deeper sense in which our conversation is “about” our continuing friendship; though we do not explicitly talk about this topic, it is the reason for our getting together, and it provides the essential context for our conversation and, indeed, the fundamental tone—the warm, comfortable, “friendly” tone—of our exchange.⁵⁰ In this sense, then, our friendship is the “harmony” of our conversation, a harmony without which it would not make sense for us to have the conversation we are having. Further, there is a familiar rhythm to our ongoing conversational pattern, such that, for example, we meet every Monday or whenever he is in town. This regularity is the reassuring “rhythm” of our friendship, and our specific conversation will resonate with this rhythmic meaning either by reproducing it comfortably, or by having to address a gap that has emerged between us because it is the first meeting after an unexplained hiatus, or by suggesting something exciting by being a meeting that is coming up more quickly than our meetings normally do. And, indeed, even within my friend’s conversation, we can see a “logic”—a “polytemporality”—of melody, harmony, and rhythm.⁵¹ My friend begins talking, and each word he speaks, like each sound in the melody of a piece of music, announces itself as carrying forward something that was begun by previous words and that will continue in future words. He is telling me a story, for example, or making an argument. Like a melody, then, my friend’s ongoing interaction with me has a temporality of sequential development. Just as a melody can be direct or meandering, so, too, can my friend’s conversation: he may stay on topic or make frequent digressions. Yet in addition to the temporality of melody, my friend’s words also have the temporality of rhythm. My friend may be a plodding or a hurried speaker. He may deliver his words in short bursts followed by long pauses or in a consistently flowing stream. Again, the very meaning

of the “melody” of his speech will be shaped by this rhythmic meaning: it will be my familiarity with his characteristic rhythm that allows me to grasp the emotional tone of his speech, and whether or not he does in fact repeat this characteristic rhythm will again be highly significant for grasping the sense of his communication. My friend’s words, too, are contextualized not only by other words, but also by the facial expressions and gestures that are simultaneous with his words. These facial expressions and gestures resonate with—“harmonize”—my friend’s words and give my experience of him its specific character. Words that, when resonating with a smile, will be experienced as friendly will, when resonating with a stern look, be experienced as hostile. Grasping the sense of my interaction with my friend implicitly depends upon my familiarity with his rhythmic style and my attunement to the sense of his body language, and not just upon my correctly ascertaining the discrete meaning of the single words he is presently speaking. In both the broad structure of our friendship, then, and in the internal structure of my friend’s speaking, we can see the way that the meaning of our conversation is simultaneously a matter of melody, harmony, and rhythm.

Beyond thinking about an isolated experience like a conversation in terms of melody, harmony, and rhythm, we can also think about the whole of a person’s experience in these terms. Whatever experiences she has, a person is herself a living being who, for example, is innately sensitive to natural cycles like “day and night, hunger and drowsiness, the seasons, menstruation, and sexual arousal.”⁵² She acts, for example, as someone who regularly needs to eat and sleep, and these recurring demands are a meaningful rhythm that is ongoingly definitive of her experience as a whole. In addition to being a living being who answers to the cycles of nature, she is also someone who, in developing certain habits rather than others, has acquired a specific character, and this, too, is formative of the sense of the things she experiences. She acts, for example, as someone for whom honesty with others comes easily or with great difficulty. Her character, which resonates in all her actions even as it is not generally her focus, is the harmony of her experience. Whatever more specific activities occur within her life—experiences like the conversation of our example, with its own intrinsic harmonies and rhythms—these experiences will themselves all be contextualized by these more fundamental structures of rhythm and harmony—“platform” and “character”—that define the *world* of the individual person as such.⁵³

Our experience is never, in other words, reducible simply to the specific things or people of which we are explicitly aware. The goings on of these specific things or people do indeed form the melody of our experience, but their significance is always embedded in the more basic form—the rhythm and the harmony—of our experience that is projected by our own natural and habitual character. The relations of anticipation and resolution that are enacted in the activities we explicitly plan for ourselves always exist along with, and draw their power and significance from, more deeply embedded relations of anticipation and resolution that are enacted in the harmony and rhythm of our experience. The sense, for example, of your request that I help you with an errand will be quite different for me if I experience it in light of the exuberance of the start of my day rather than in light of the exhaustion of the end of my day; and again, how I feel that that request calls upon me “to dance,” as Russon puts it, will be quite different if I am a person of fundamentally honest or fundamentally dishonest character.

To notice the temporalities of rhythm and harmony that operate within our experience is to notice that the present meanings of the specific people or things that we focus upon are not simply self-defined, but they have their sense given, rather, by their placement within the meaningful context that is our way of having a world. Revising this sense of the meaning of the object of our experience, however, further entails a revision of our sense of ourselves: we typically understand our own activities in terms of the immediate sense of our particular object, not recognizing how much the deeper structures of our experience are simultaneously shaping the meaning of that thing and our behavior toward it. Consequently, our own explicit sense of what we are doing is typically an insufficient grasp of the real structures and motivations that are formative of and operative in our experience. We are not, Russon argues, the “self-possessed intellects . . . who set explicit goals for ourselves that we then accomplish in the world through executing plans through utilizing our bodies upon the world” that we typically take ourselves to be.⁵⁴ This “intellectual” model of the person should be replaced with a model of “‘musical’ subjectivity” that recognizes that “the attitude of giving oneself over to the guiding force of rhythmic epiphany is more basic than the attitude of self-conscious, goal-directed manipulation of limbs and world.”⁵⁵ The disparity in perspective between a father and a son with whom I am familiar is helpful for illuminating how the unreflective

experience of a “world” shapes our present perspective—both cognitively and behaviorally—in ways we do not immediately avow.

The father is a man who grew up in Italy during World War II. Food and other supplies were scarce, and meeting the family’s basic needs required everyone in the family, including the children, to work. He had little time to play; weekends and holidays were lived, just like any other day, under the unrelenting pressure to meet the family’s basic needs. Several homes in his town were damaged by bombs, and he watched as the families that lived in these homes struggled to repair them. Several years into the war, Nazi soldiers marched into his town and forced many of its male inhabitants, including his father, to join them as they continued their campaign south. His family did not know where his father was, or even if he was alive, until his father returned home several months later. Though his father’s absence was deeply upsetting, the precariousness of their situation gave them little chance to acknowledge its emotional toll; his family had to throw themselves even more intensely into their work.

This man’s childhood world was one of insecurity and deprivation, and though he now remembers few explicit details about his childhood, it is this *world* that he continues to live as the rhythm and harmony of his present experiences. His relentless work schedule provides the established platform for his present experience, and his habitual preoccupation with further increasing his family’s material wealth, coupled with his habitual obliviousness to the physical and emotional toll that this preoccupation takes on him and his family, provides the qualitative character of his present experience. He approached his education as a means of acquiring a well-paying job, and he continues to make decisions about his work based on how much money he will be able to earn: to him, it seemed *obvious* that this was the necessary approach. He also *takes it for granted* that he will find his work uninteresting and tedious, and he is correspondingly unsympathetic to others’ experiences of distress or illness, expecting that they, like he, will prioritize continuing to work above all else. In particular, he was appalled by his son’s decision to give up a well-paying job in order to pursue his musical interests. He views his son’s behavior as placing not just his son, but the entire family, at risk; not only will his son no longer be contributing monetarily to his family, but his son also may very well now require his father’s financial support. He considers his son to be lazy and selfish for putting his family in this position, and he responds to his son’s decision as an assault on the family.

His son, on the other hand, considers his father to be cruel and insensitive. His childhood, unlike his father's, was one of security, and his lived experience of the world is as basically supportive. He feels no need to constantly prepare for the possibility of economic hardship. He experiences his current office job as an unacceptable distraction from the true focus of his life, and he is confident that he can, if necessary, find another well-paying job in the future. He cannot understand why his father would want him to pursue work he has no real interest in, and he is deeply upset by his father's dismissive attitude toward his musical pursuits.

What is salient in the difference between the perspectives of father and son here is what they take for granted—what they take to be *obvious*.⁵⁶ For the father, it is not an explicit focus of his experience but the assumed context of all his perception that “one must work”; for the son, it is not an explicit focus of his experience but the assumed context of all his perception that “one should cultivate one's interests.” The *worlds* of father and son are thus structured around orienting principles that are fundamentally different, and these different principles show themselves in the *rhythm* of everyday living that allows them to feel comfortable and in the *harmony* of daily life that is the defining projects that give their daily affairs meaning and purpose. The father feels validated by the rhythm of the alternating struggle of merely instrumental work and the rewarding satisfaction of enjoying the material flourishing of his family, and his particular actions are harmonized by the projects, carried out over years, of progressively improving the social and financial position of his family. The son, on the contrary, feels validated when he can live with the rhythm of unfettered creativity, working at his own pace at developing his music, and his particular actions are harmonized by the gradual unfolding of the various artistic projects that collectively work towards his becoming an independently successful musician. The same set of actions, then, appear quite differently to father and son: the father's actions that seem to himself to be obviously proper and successful seem to the son to be oppressive both to the father himself and to others, whereas the son's actions that seem to himself to be obvious experiences of flourishing seem to the father to be trivial, self-indulgent, and wasteful. We began our study of phenomenology by reflecting on the basic difference between the figure and the background in our perceptual experience; using, now, Russon's notion of the “musical polytemporality” of experience, we can

see, in this conflict between father and son, how rich, deep and complex this perceptual background is.

The rhythmic and harmonic dimensions of our experience mean that we encounter things with a certain already established momentum that makes it far more likely that we experience these things in certain ways rather than others. Insofar as the platform and character of my experience inform the meaning of all those things that I explicitly attend to, I often do not realize that these things could have a different meaning. To experience things differently, then, I must first realize that my perception is not simply a neutral observation of “how things obviously are,” but is instead an interpretation—a perspective that is deeply shaped by habitual expectations. Enacting such a change in perception may, however, be more difficult than we would expect, and I will focus shortly on why this is the case.

The rhythmic and harmonic dimensions of our experience usually define the perspective through which the things that are our focus take on their significance rather than being themselves the focus of our experience. The rhythm of work and success and the harmony of the project of furthering his family’s economic and cultural advancement are, as we noted above, taken by the father in our example to be *obvious* structures of meaningful experience and thus are not noticed by him as optional features of perception—certainly not as meaningful components of experience that *he* is contributing. Similarly, the rhythm of self-defined activity and the harmony of creative self-development are taken by the son to be *obvious* structures of meaningful life rather than appearing to him as simply his own preferences. For either of these two individuals, to recognize these features as optional would be to recognize them as dubitable, as matters of opinion, whereas *for* the father and *for* the son they seem simply to be matters of fact. To recognize these deep rhythms and harmonies of our experience, then, is not a simple matter of observation, but involves adopting a significantly self-critical attitude.

While these dimensions of our perspective are not generally something we are aware of, we can become aware of them and, because they are rooted in our own habits, we can change them. We can imagine that this father or this son might want to change his way of acting in order to be more accommodating to the wishes of the other. Yet even as one explicitly wants to change this or that behavior, it can prove very difficult to do so. This is because the real issue is not found in the simple behavior that is the explicit focus of our attention, but it is found

in the orienting rhythms and harmonies that give that behavior meaning. To make a change, we will have to acknowledge that the rhythmic and harmonic dimensions of our experience, though they allowed us to inhabit the world comfortably in the past, are now a source of discomfort. Though the habits we have developed were important ways of building a life for ourselves, they now impede, rather than support, our continuing development. These habits, though, are not themselves matters that one finds optional, but they have rather become the very fabric of how one finds things meaningful. Consequently, to change my behavior, I must transform the way that I inhabit the world.

In a very deep way, then, we can now see the significance of the idea that the description of our experience—“phenomenology”—is not a simple or an obvious matter: to grasp what is actually happening in our experience requires us to recognize our deeply submerged prejudices, commitments, and expectations, deeply submerged structures that have precisely become the structure—the “platform and character”—upon which *the meaningfulness of our lives* rests.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have been reflecting on phenomenology as the project of describing our experience. What we have seen, in progressively deeper and richer ways, is that our experience fundamentally has a “figure-background” structure and that to describe our experience well, therefore, requires that we make explicit the otherwise nonreflective “background” elements that are always formative of our experience and that determine the founding parameters—the “platform” and “character,” as Russon puts it—of the more focal meanings of our experience. What we will now investigate more directly is our experience of other people—in their role as focal objects of our experience, but also in their role in the formative backgrounds of experience.