# Enactivism and the "problem" of perceptual presence

*It is essential for the thing and for the world to be presented as "open," to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, and to promise us always "something more to see."*
*— Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

## Introduction

One of the virtues of enactive theories (e.g. Varela et al. 1991; Hurley and Noë 2003; Noë 2004, 2012; Hutto and Myin 2013) is that they take notions like activity, movement, and embodiment to be fundamental in an account of perception. According to such theories, perceiving the world is something we do with our bodies, i.e. a kind of behavior, if not a full-fledged *action.* According to some enactivists, who Hutto and Myin (2013) call 'sensorimotor enactivists' (Hurley 1998, O'Regan and Noë 2001, Hurley and Noë 2003, Noë 2004), perception requires a certain degree of *skill*. We don't perceive the world merely by virtue of having functioning eyes and visual system[1]: we *learn* how to perceive by acquiring and exercising certain capacities. Perceiving, in this sense, is no different from walking or speaking: learned pretty quickly and generally effortlessly, but learned nonetheless. According to Alva Noë (2004, 2008, 2012), perception is an activity that makes it possible for the world to 'show up', to be known or acted upon. When the world shows up this way, that is, through our perceptual activity, the very "perceptual presence" (2004, 59) of the world is part of our experience. The perceivable world, made of mind-independent, solid, three-dimensional, mid-sized objects, becomes and stays perceptually present for us in virtue of our perceiving it.

[1] As most other people who have written on this topic, I will mostly talk about vision. However, the reader should be free to extend all that is being said to other sensory modalities. As a matter of fact, it might turn out that certain claims made with vision in mind are not easily 'translatable' in other modalities. This is definitely a problem worth further consideration, but I won't discuss it in this paper.

But how exactly can three-dimensional objects be perceptually present in its entirety, if at each moment in time we are only directly presented with the particular side of the object that's currently reflecting light into our eyes? Take for example the visual experience of a coffee cup. At any given instant, strictly speaking, we can see only the side of the cup that's directly facing us. The backside of the cup is, from our point of view, invisible. How, then, can it seem to us that we experience the entire coffee cup as a full three-dimensional object, with no need to guess, or think, or infer that the cup has an unseen back side as well as a front side? In other words, it might seem problematic to explain how it is possible, at any given time, to see the whole (the cup) without seeing each and every part that makes up such whole (e.g. the cup's front and back sides). What's perceptually present for us are cups, not front sides of cups. Noë calls this the 'problem' of perceptual presence. The problem, as Noë sees it, can be formulated as a tension between the following two theses:

**Presence of Objects**: In ordinary perceptual experience*, objects* seem to be immediately present to consciousness.

**Perspectivalness**: Experience is essentially *perspectival.* We experience the world from a point of view, and for this reason objects aren't accessed through our senses 'all at once'.

Noë finds it puzzling that, on the one hand, experience is perspectival, and thus what our sensory organs directly detect is only a 'portion' of the object at each time, and that, on the other hand, experience seems to put us directly in touch with entire objects, not with parts

of them. Interpreting the relation between the two claims in this way gives rise to the problem:[2]

> On the one hand, we perceptually experience objects, events, and states of affairs. You see the deer crossing the road; you hear your friend doing the dishes in the next room; you touch the hairbrush. On the other hand, all we ever experience are those aspects of things that are visible, audible, and so forth: for example, how they look or sound or feel from here. (2004, p. 163)

In short, the 'problem' invites us to explain how perceptual experience can present us with the three-dimensional world *despite* its being intrinsically perspectival.

Even though Noë's account does a good job capturing the puzzling nature of perceptual presence and appeals to the right resources (e.g. our capacity for movement, the inseparability of perception and action, perception as active exploration), I argue that perceptual presence can be better understood by integrating Noë's account with a different kind of approach. In particular, I suggest that Noë's view explains how certain objects can be perceptually present *as the specific objects they are,* but that something else is needed in

[2] This 'problem' has been formulated several other times in somehow similar ways. For instance, Siewert (2015) asks: "how can our visual experience, inevitably limited by perspective, provide us with something to think about and act upon, *beyond* that perspective?" (p. 23), while Schellenberg (2010) invites us to explain how it is that "a subject's perception is not limited to the ways objects are presented in her egocentric framework of reference" (p. 152), and how one "transcends" such egocentric framework of reference (Ibid.). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1945) claims that "we must attempt to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective." (p. 69). Wilfrid Sellars is also interested in this 'problem' when he introduces, in his 1978 paper "The role of imagination in Kant's theory of experience", the distinction between seeing an object *as* something (i.e. the content of our perceptual experience) and seeing something *of* the object (i.e. its proper and common sensibles, what's directly accessible by the senses). Sellars would say that ellipticality is what we see *of* the coin, and we see the coin *as* round: he follows Kant and makes seeing *as* a matter of judgment/belief, and what Noë calls 'presence-in-absence' a matter of constructive imagination. Noë, on the other hand, denies that there is any construction or imagining going on: awareness of occluded parts of objects (presence-in-absence), as well as awareness of objects as wholes, is perceptual through and through. In other words, Noë would claim that we see *of* the coin its roundness, and *of* an apple its internal white flesh. But we see *of* the coin its roundness and *of* the apple its white flesh *in* seeing *of* the coin its ellipticality and *of* the apple its red surface. As I will argue later on, the way in which Noë spells out this idea of seeing the intrinsic properties or the whole object *in* whatever is visible from our viewpoint in terms of a part-whole relation. We see the roundness of the coin in its perspectival ellipticality the same way in which we hear the melody in the succession of tones, or we touch a person by touching their hand.

order to make this possible in the first place. We need a way to explain what makes the world *in general* – made of 'things' we can grasp, bump into, throw, step on, etc. – show up in perceptual experience. The main goals of this paper are to understand this more primitive notion of perceptual presence and to highlight its importance within a broadly enactivist framework.

In what follows, I will first present Noë's account of perceptual presence (which I call the 'Virtual presence' view, or VIP view) as it comes out of his more general theory of perception (section 1). Secondly, I will argue that the VIP view, in order to do its explanatory work regarding presence of *objects*, has to be integrated with a more basic notion of presence, which I call 'presence of *things*' (section 2). To articulate what presence of things amounts to and how it is achieved, I will rely mostly on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1947) and Sean Kelly (2005, 2007), whom Noë himself often engages with. The account I propose is rooted in the idea that things are perceptually present in virtue of being perceived as *open* to further exploration, that is, thanks to the fact that our experience of them is in an important sense *indeterminate.* For things to 'show up' in the sense of being perceptually present, there is no need to have expectations or knowledge of any kind regarding what further exploration of the object will *actually* reveal. The mere experience that something could be revealed is enough to sustain perceptual presence in the most basic sense. If we want to understand the notion of perceptual presence in its entirety, this basic level rooted in indeterminacy is key. The next section starts by presenting the Virtual presence view.

## 1. The Virtual presence view

Noë takes perception to be a kind of activity; an activity that requires skill: "The process of perceiving, of finding out how things are, is a process of meeting the world; it is an activity of skillful exploration" (2004, p. 165). Noë argues that, in order to perceive the world, with its objects and properties, we must have a certain capacity to 'interpret' what's detected by our sensory organs. This capacity is exercised whenever we have a perceptual experience of some object in the world, and in turn having a perceptual experience means being engaged in an activity of exploration of our surroundings. More specifically, the capacity that's exercised in order to perceive is the capacity to acquire and utilize a special kind of knowledge: knowledge of how our actively generated movements change the way in which an object appears from our point of view.

At each moment in time, an object presents to us one of its perspectival *aspects*, that is, what we would see if we projected the object on a two-dimensional vertical plane. As we move, the perspectival aspect of the object changes, and it changes in ways that are lawfully related to our movements. This specifies a pattern of *sensorimotor dependence* between the perspectival aspect an object manifests and the perceiver's movements. These patterns are collectively referred to as an object's "sensorimotor profile", and knowledge of the sensorimotor profile is what enables the object itself to be perceptually present in our experience:[3]

> When you experience something as cubical, you experience it as presenting a definite sensorimotor profile. That is, you experience it as something whose appearance would vary in precise ways as you move in relation to it, or as it moves in relation to you. You have an implicit practical mastery of these patterns of change. (2004, p. 117)

[3] Noë stresses multiple times that, in his view, all perceptual modalities should be understood using touch as a model. In Noë's theory, vision is just as exploratory and active in character as touch.

It is important to emphasize that, in Noë's view, knowledge of sensorimotor profiles ('sensorimotor knowledge' for short) is supposed to be *implicit* and *practical*: it is not expressed through propositions, it is not explicitly relied upon by perceivers every time an object is perceptually present. Rather, once it is acquired, it is always in the background of perceptual experiences, generally in the form of implicit "*expectations* of the sensory effects of movement" (Noë 2004, p. 119). Noë argues that without sensorimotor knowledge, even only temporarily, the world wouldn't 'show up', we wouldn't perceive it. Possession and (implicit) exercise of sensorimotor knowledge, therefore, is the very enabling condition of perception and, consequently, of perceptual presence.[4] Perceptual presence is, on this view, a full-fledged achievement: "Presence does not come for free; we achieve it. It is hard-won, if it is won at all" (2012, p. 40). Thanks to our implicit knowledge of sensorimotor profiles and to the expectations 'coloring' our active perceptual exploration of the world, the parts of objects that are not currently impinging on our senses (e.g. the back side of the cup) can nonetheless 'show up' in our experience, as "present-in-absence". Presence-in-absence, in turn, makes the entire three-dimensional object perceptually present or, more precisely, *virtually* present (Noë 2004, 63). Thus, the 'Virtual presence (VIP) view' holds that objects are perceptually present insofar as every part of them is *accessible*, i.e.

[4] Consider an analogy with the case of perceiving speech. If someone knows, e.g., Turkish, this person clearly perceives the separation of the single words, the sounds characteristic of Turkish speech as opposed to, say, Turkish singing, the tone of a question as opposed to an assertion, etc.; I don't. A Turkish speaker perceives Turkish speech; I don't. Knowledge of Turkish, in this case, seems to be the very condition that *enables* perception of Turkish speech. According to Noë's view, mastery of sensorimotor dependence patterns plays the same kind of role in perceptual experiences as knowledge of Turkish does in Turkish speech perception. Knowledge of a language is relied upon in the form of implicit expectations regarding the phonemes that will follow based on what has been heard so far, thereby enabling a perceptual experience permeated with *understanding*. According to Noë, practical knowledge of patterns of sensorimotor dependence works analogously in the case of object-perception. The clarification (Noë, 2008, pp. 702-703) comes as a response to a criticism formulated by Campbell (2008).

observable/perceivable, by the subject, though not all at once, where accessibility is guaranteed by the possession of and ability to employ sensorimotor knowledge. As long as we (albeit implicitly) know how the perspectival aspect of an object changes in relation to our movements, the not-currently-seen parts are present-in-absence, and the object is virtually present, and the apparent tension between *Presence of Objects* and *Perspectivalness* is eliminated:

> The cat, the tomato, the bottle, the detailed scene, all are present perceptually in the sense that they are perceptually accessible to us. They are present to perception as accessible. They are, in this sense, *virtually* present.
> The ground of this accessibility is our possession of sensorimotor skills. […] In particular, the basis of perceptual presence is to be found in those skills whose possession is constitutive, in the ways I have been proposing, of sensory perception. (Noë 2004, p. 63)

As anticipated in the introduction, I think that Noë's Virtual presence account solves the problem of perceptual presence as it's been formulated, that is, by easing the tension between the two theses which, it should be noticed, make the puzzle about single objects (a cat, a tomato, a *detailed*[5] scene, etc.). However, I think that we need a different, more primitive notion of perceptual presence in order to fully make sense of virtual presence. The next section discusses why the VIP view needs to be integrated with what in fact it seems to already presuppose.

## 2. Presence of 'things'

[5] It is important that Noë talks about a "detailed" scene. Indeed, what he seems to mean is that a scene as a whole is present, according to the VIP view, insofar as its individual components are present (and specifically, virtually present). This contrasts quite directly with the indeterminacy which, I will argue later, sustains the more basic notion of 'presence of things', and shows how Noë's account needs to be integrated by such a notion.

First of all, it is good to re-state that perceptual presence is a phenomenological notion: it is supposed to capture what it is like to perceive an object as a whole, as 'out there' independently of us or on how it appears from our current viewpoint. According to the VIP view, perceptual presence of objects is achieved thanks to the (implicit) possession and employment of relevant sensorimotor knowledge. This knowledge enables the not currently seen sides of objects to be present-in-absence, as well as the currently presented perspectival aspect to be experienced as, indeed, a perspectival aspect *of* a three-dimensional object. In this way, Noë dissolves the tension between the two claims I labeled *Presence of Objects* and *Perspectivalness*: *because* experience is perspectival, we need to move and actively explore the world in order to find out about what is not currently perceivable from our point of view. By exploring, we collect sensorimotor knowledge, which in turn is what sustains the perceptual presence of objects. The 'problem', in the form of a tension between the two claims, is then solved by showing how the notion of sensorimotor knowledge is there in virtue of *Perspectivalness* being true, and it is what makes it possible for *Presence of Objects* to be true, as well. Basically, sensorimotor knowledge is the solution to the problem of perceptual presence: it explains away the tension between the two claims, and is at the basis of the notions of 'virtual presence' and 'presence-in-absence'.

However, notice that when we talk about perceptual presence, we could be talking about two different things. On the one hand, there is perceptual presence of single, individual objects *as the objects they are* – as opposed, for instance, to what they might only *appear to be,* if anything at all. On the other hand, there is perceptual presence of the world more generally, that is, a global sense of being 'immersed' in a reality, as an object among objects, with no need to specify the identity of the surrounding objects except for being 'things', that

is, solid, mid-size items which exist independently of us, which we can act on, and which we can react to.

Even if we granted Noë that the former kind of perceptual presence depends on knowledge of particular sensorimotor profiles, that is definitely not necessary if all we want is presence in the latter sense. For example, it is plausible that, if one has never seen a piano before and is only presented with one from a single viewpoint, one wouldn't perceive it as the object it is with respect to its 3D shape. In order for a piano-shaped object to be perceptually present, Noë would say, one needs to have implicit sensorimotor knowledge of the piano's sensorimotor profile, that is, a sense of how the object will look like if one moved this or that way in respect to it. However, for the active exploration through which one would acquire knowledge of the piano's sensorimotor profile, there must be a sense in which the object is *already* perceptually present. Otherwise, the exploration wouldn't take place: one wouldn't try to explore the back side of a picture of a piano. There must be something that motivates the perceiver to explore further, that gives the perceiver a sense of the presence of a 'thing' (not yet a 'piano'), something three-dimensional, solid, etc. whose shape (and other qualities) *could* be discovered through sensorimotor exploration.

It is a mistake, I think, to limit the notion of perceptual presence of the world to the way in which we might perceive certain properties of objects, and especially 3D shape. In order for us to perceive 3D shape, a *thing* with that shape must be perceptually present *before* that, too. Because (sensorimotor) enactivism considers perception as an activity, constitutively tied to movement and, thus, to embodiment, a notion of perceptual presence that captures how a perceiver experiences its being a 'thing among things' at the most basic level, before anything like perspectival aspects are even 'registered', seems to be naturally

needed within the framework. Therefore, now I turn to sketching account of 'presence of things' which draws from, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's idea of *indeterminacy* and, on the other hand, Kelly's idea that perception has a *normative a*spect.

## 3. Perceptual presence and indeterminacy

Merleau-Ponty doesn't talk explicitly about perceptual presence, although in fact some people would argue that he is very much preoccupied by the 'problem' the same way Noë is.[6] I, however, want to suggest that Merleau-Ponty provided us with important resources to understand perceptual presence, and in particular the kind of presence I called 'presence of things', independently of the issue of what his actual view on the matter, if any, is. To contextualize what comes next, it is useful to know that Merleau-Ponty puts forward his view of perception as a reaction to what he calls "objective thought". Objective thought is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a general way of understanding reality, mostly found in science, in which abstraction and idealization dominate, and there is a constant attempt to go 'beyond' whatever is subjective and perspectival. Objective thought "knows only

[6] It is controversial whether Merleau-Ponty's views on perception push him too close to a form of idealism. On one interpretation (e.g. Kelly 2005), Merleau-Ponty holds the view that objects can never be fully seen, except if we were able to take up all the possible perspectives at once or, in other words, the "view from everywhere" (1945/2013, p. 71). Since Kelly attributes to Merleau-Ponty the view that objects are actually perceived only if we can have the view from everywhere, and this view isn't a view that we can ever have, this seems to make an idealist out of Merleau-Ponty, and therefore not very helpful in dealing with perceptual presence. Most of us would probably be tempted to choose Noë's account, however flawed it might be, over a thoroughly idealistic one. However, on another interpretation (e.g. Matherne 2017), even though Merleau-Ponty discusses the view from everywhere and claims that it is preferable to what he calls the "view from nowhere" (1945/2013, p. 69) which he attributes to 'rationalist' idealists such as Leibniz, he doesn't himself endorse such a position. According to this alternative interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's view, the view from everywhere is also ultimately implausible, precisely because it would put the objects beyond any human capacity to perceive them. In other passages of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty's views seem quite incompatible with idealism: the role played by the body and by the concrete engagement with the world that our bodies afford, as well as their capacity to generate the most primitive form of intentionality, seem to steer Merleau-Ponty more in the direction of realism. Ultimately, whatever Merleau-Ponty's own view on the topic may be, the very fact that there is interpretative disagreement is good reason to refuse Merleau-Ponty's 'help' a priori.

dichotomies" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013, p. 50), is reductionist, and aims at decomposing every complex aspect of the world into simpler parts organized in a way that follows the laws of logic, mathematics, and physics. With respect to perception in particular, Merleau-Ponty calls his opponents who endorse a form of objective thought 'intellectualists', and they are mostly philosophers and psychologists following a neo-Kantian conception of experience and thought. According to intellectualism, perception can be explained in terms of fully determinate symbols/representations caused by sensory stimulation and abstract rules (either applied unconsciously, like Helmholtz argues, or consciously in the form of beliefs) to combine them, similar to what would become the computationalist approach of, among others, David Marr and Jerry Fodor.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that intellectualists (and empiricists, for that matter), in virtue of their commitment to the objective thought framework, do not understand that perception does not really work like science: the kind of objectivity and perspective-independence afforded by perception is of a different nature. When we perceive, we don't primarily aim at intellectually categorize the world, that is, to describe in terms of symbols and rules to combine them. We perceptually relate to the world in an *engaged* way, as immersed in a web of invitations, triggers, motivations to explore and react. As embodied perceivers, we don't look at the world 'from the outside', as if we were looking at it through a camera and the goal was to get the most detailed 'description' of the scene in front of us. Our real perceptual experience has depth, fuzziness, openness: in a word, it is in an important sense *indeterminate*.

The indeterminacy intrinsic to perceptual experience is not easy to define, and Merleau-Ponty himself provides only a few phenomenological descriptions to serve as

examples. These descriptions aim at showing that, in fact, we routinely *experience* indeterminacy whenever we perceive the world. Indeterminacy makes a *positive* contribution to our experience. This positive experience of indeterminacy, Merleau-Ponty thinks, is what makes the difference between genuinely perceiving and treating experience "as an object" (1945, 73), the way objective thought does. For this reason, in trying to understand perception and the way in which objects are presented in perception, "we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (1945, p. 7).

Different interpreters have emphasized the role of some examples and left others unexplored. I, on the contrary, think that all of the examples Merleau-Ponty gives should be considered as contributions towards the same explanatory goal, namely an attempt to articulate what this positively experienced indeterminacy consists in. In particular, I think that Merleau-Ponty tries to explain what indeterminacy is with the help of two ideas: the first is the notion of 'horizon', which he takes from Husserl; the second is mostly worked out by Kelly through his proposal that perception involves some kind of normativity. The next two sub-sections are devoted to clarifying these two aspects of the view of presence of things I am putting forward.

### *3.1 Indeterminacy and the 'horizon'*

Here is a first example: a bell tower, always at the same distance from the subject, can appear closer or farther away depending on how much detail (i.e. other objects, such as houses or hills) there is between it and the subject. The less detail in between, the closer to the subject the tower looks (1945, p. 50). This example aims to show that sometimes differences between experiences cannot be accounted for in terms of determinate changes

registered by our sensory systems, even including more 'global' rules governing the so-called 'gestalt' effects. Indeed, there is no way to determine exactly how much closer or farther away the bell tower looks to be in the two cases, because, or so Merleau-Ponty argues, it is simply an aspect of our experience which is necessarily indeterminate and emerging from how the scene as a whole is organized for the particular embodied perceiver experiencing it. In fact, trying to measure how much farther or closer the bell tower looks depending on how the rest of the scene is arranged is *in principle* impossible: the moment we try to describe the appearance of the bell tower in magnitude terms, we actively get rid of the indeterminacy, and pretend that the perceived world is like a painted canvas in front of our eyes. When we talk about the appearance of the bell tower in the way in which we genuinely perceive it, we are *not* talking about Noë's notion of perspectival aspect, or about the sensations measured by the physiologist. Such things, Merleau-Ponty would say, do not belong in perception, and do not actually show up in experience: they are abstractions, features of objective thought.

By being a phenomenological notion, however, perceptual presence is something that needs to be accounted for within the domain of perceptual experience, not of objective thought. If Merleau-Ponty is right, and perceptual experience is essentially and necessarily indeterminate, we cannot explain perceptual presence unless we make room for indeterminacy in our account. How to make sense of how indeterminacy enables perceptual presence, then? According to Merleau-Ponty, the difference between the two appearances of the bell tower can only be described as an "I don't know what" ("je ne sais quoi"). Indeterminacy is positively experienced in experiencing *that* the bell tower looks different in the two situations without being able to say exactly *what* the difference consists in. All we can say about such difference is in terms of the role it plays, and Merleau-Ponty argues that

the role of indeterminacy is to keep the object (in this case, the bell tower) 'open' for the subject. To be open, in turn, means to invite further exploration by disclosing the structure of the perceived scene consistently with the subject's powers and purposes. Perceiving an object as open (that is, perceiving the indeterminacy) means being aware that there is something more to perceive, something beyond what impinges on our sense organs at any given moment, and that, whatever it is, it is there *for me*, in virtue of the kind of creature I am, which goals I have, which habits and skills I have developed, etc. An open object, just like an open door, invites us to go beyond, and tells us that we're not done exploring.

Sometimes, Merleau-Ponty talks about what makes it the case that objects are experienced as open in terms of the notion, first found in Husserl, of 'horizon'. Once again, an analogy can help articulate the concept. When we enjoy a scenic view, the horizon, on one hand, makes it manifest that there is more to be seen beyond it, but, on the other hand, it gives structure, meaning, and unity to what we can indeed see from where we stand. Merleau-Ponty thinks of an object's experienced openness, which is in turn a way to make sense of indeterminacy, in an analogous way: it is that aspect of experience which can never be made determinate, can never be 'reached' (the horizon isn't an objective location in space), yet it is fundamental for the unity and perceived reality of objects. As Samantha Matherne puts it: "a horizon is something that holds out the unknown to you as something to explore. So although […] the object […] can be encountered from different perspectives, this horizon is indeterminate and so leaves the object opaque and incomplete in the way that Merleau-Ponty thinks it is" (2017, 712).

In sum, this sort of indeterminacy manifested in the 'horizon' is part of our experience of objects, and it is precisely what allows us to experience objects as objects, that is, as

voluminous and open to further exploration. I don't think that we can fully understand perceptual presence and its phenomenology without making room for the experience of indeterminacy and of the horizon. What's hidden forms the horizon, the indeterminate background that s experienced as indeterminate and as such invites us to discover more. Feeling the pull of these invitations to discover more is, I think, a fundamental constituent of perceptual presence. This time, it is in Sean Kelly's reading of Merleau-Ponty that we find an explanation of how invitations to explore are part of our experience of objects. Kelly's interpretation of what Merleau-Ponty says about the normative dimension of perception illuminates further what it can be for objects to be perceptually present in a way that integrates and clarifies the notion of presence-in-absence of occluded parts.

*3.2 The normativity of perception*

Let's start once again from an example. Illumination plays a fundamental role in our experiences of colors. However, not every color is best perceived in the same kind of light: some colors will be best perceived in dim light, while others will be best perceived when the light is brighter. Moreover, there is no definite procedure to determine the degree of illumination each specific color will require in order to be experienced best: it depends on the scene as a whole, on our goals, the level of adaptation of our eyes, etc. Illumination is, on one hand, an essential component of the very experience of color, it is what enables colors to show up for us in the first place. However, at the same time, its contribution to the phenomenology of perception is indeterminate, that is, it is not fully captured by what we know about the laws and mathematical formulas of physics and optics: it must be *experienced*. Sean Kelly (2005, 2007, 2010) uses the example of light and colors to articulate

what he takes to be Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception having a *normative* dimension. Putting this example together with the example of the bell tower in the previous sub-section (where the difference in appearance in two different situations is positively experienced as indeterminate), the notion of indeterminacy and the sense in which it is an ineliminable component of perceptual experience (and, therefore, necessary for perceptual presence) acquire more substance and can be unpacked further. Here is how Kelly describes the sense in which lighting plays a positively indeterminate role in color experiences:

> To speak mathematically, I experience the light not as a determinate quantity but rather in terms of the direction, and perhaps even the slope, of the improvement curve. […] what my experience tells me at any given moment is whether more or less light will improve my view; and also perhaps how drastic the improvement will be. In this way the lighting plays a positive role in my experience, *but is never registered determinately*. (2005, 12; emphasis mine)

In the passage above, Kelly argues that the best way to capture the relationship between colors and light in our experience is by saying that light has some sort of *prescriptive* or *normative* influence on colors, that is, that it plays an active role in sustaining our color experiences by 'telling us' how our experience of the color we're experiencing could improve or worsen. In other words, our sensitivity to variations in illumination and to the influence of such variations on color experiences sustains the color experience itself: without such sensitivity, and without the relation between colors and illumination being noticeable and law-like (though not in a mathematically determinate sense), colors wouldn't be experienced as perceptually present, that is, as colors of surfaces out there in the world.

For example, contrast the experience of a green circular plate hung on the wall and the experience of a green circular afterimage. The greenness of the plate is experienced as 'out there', as perceptually present in the sense in which objects in the world are, while the

afterimage is experienced in a quite different way: it is clearly not 'out there' in any interesting sense, and it doesn't 'feel' real, present as if it were a property possessed by an object in the world. The difference, Merleau-Ponty and Kelly would say, consists in the fact that while the greenness of the plate stands in relation with illumination so that our experience is influenced by such a relation (and manifestly so), the greenness of the after-image is isolated from the effects of illumination, and this contributes to it not being experienced as present in the world. The experience of the green plate includes some sort of norm-responsiveness in virtue of the way in which our visual system is sensitive to the influence of illumination on colors and color-relations. The experience of the green afterimage, on the other hand, doesn't. Norm-responsiveness is at the core of perceptual presence, both of objects and of their properties:

> Our experiences themselves simply do not like to be unclear. […] stare at an object and deliberately blur your view of it. It is possible to maintain such an unclarified view of the object for a while, but it takes effort. This is the effort of resisting your body's natural tendency to get a better grip on the world out onto which it opens. When one resists the body's natural tendency to get a better grip on the world, one withdraws into oneself and away from the world. (Kelly 2010, 152)

The normative component of perception, in turn, resides in the same kind of indeterminacy that grants perceptual presence by keeping objects open for more exploration, i.e. by constituting the horizon against which our experience unfolds. Indeterminacy, in our experiences, is both what 'signals' that there is more to be experienced (by keeping objects open against a horizon), and what guides us in discovering more according to what will give us a 'better grip' on the world. Here is how Merleau-Ponty explains the normativity of perception and how following the norms allows us to keep the world more 'in focus', that is, more present to our consciousness:

> For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself – beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point […] (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 315 – 316)

*3.3 Further clarifications*

So far, I have explained what an account of perceptual presence in its most primitive form would look like if we took on board Merleau-Ponty's and Kelly's notions of indeterminacy and perceptual normativity. In the picture I have presented in this section, an object is perceptually present insofar as we experience, on the one hand, its openness, that is, its standing against an horizon/background of indeterminacy and, on the other hand, we are sensitive to the law-like way in which this very openness translates into invitations to explore more and gain a better grip on the object as a whole. This kind of perceptual presence rooted in experience of indeterminacy (as horizon or as a normative component) provides a solid base for Noë's Virtual presence view of objects and their properties (as opposed to unspecified 'things').

Recall: the VIP view states that an object is perceptually present insofar as all of its parts are perceptually accessible diachronically. This in turn means that, at each moment in time, for an object to be perceptually present, each and every part of it must be either 'directly' present in the form of the appearance it manifests from our viewpoint, or 'present-in-absence' in virtue of our having implicit practical knowledge of its entire sensorimotor profile. This is Noë's way to explain away the tension between *Perspectivalness* and *Presence of Objects*.

But by looking at Merleau-Ponty and Kelly we can articulate what it's like for an object to be perceptually present at a level that is the very condition of possibility for the problem to even be formulated in those terms. In the view I sketched in this section, perceptual presence of a 'thing' depends on its being experienced as open, and being experienced as open means precisely being experienced as having more to it, as hiding something from us. In a sense, the object's openness grants its presence as a thing the same way in which the knowledge of its sensorimotor profile grants its presence as the particular object it is in the VIP view. The mere experience of openness doesn't 'tell us' anything regarding the hidden parts of the objects: it simply tells us that they are there, and this is enough to grant their presence as things we can interact with in virtue of our own embodiment, i.e. our own way of being things.

Merleau-Ponty tells us that, when we perceive, what we do is try to keep the world in focus by responding to the invitations to explore which are manifested in the object's own openness, in the fact that the object has an indeterminate horizon and that therefore it's hiding something from us. But how can perceivers do this? Why can we experience indeterminacy, openness, and, consequently, perceptual presence? Merleau-Ponty is very clear about this: none of what he says makes sense without two assumptions. The first is that perceivers are essentially *embodied* and, as such, they inhabit the very same world they

perceive.[7] The second assumption is that perception is essentially dynamic and extended in time: the norm-responsiveness grounding perceptual presence needs time to play its role and for the subject to appreciate it fully, as does indeterminacy.

Merleau-Ponty's account is fully enactivist, and his influence on Noë is, in one sense, undeniable:[8] the very idea that sensorimotor patterns of dependence and, therefore, our capacity to move and change our viewpoint with respect to the objects we perceive, is essential to what it is to perceive comes from a tradition in which we can perhaps include, together with Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl, William James, John Dewey, James Gibson, Francisco Varela, and more. The body, in the enactivist picture, is not merely accidentally united with our cognitive capacities, with what we may call the 'intellect': it is essentially tied to it. Cognition *depends* on embodiment, and even more so does perception (as long as the distinction makes any sense at all). [9]

[7] Merleau-Ponty explicitly claims that the world is experienced as 'real' in perception because, as embodies perceivers, we are also 'things among things'. Objects 'hide' parts of themselves from us just like they 'hide' other parts from the other objects in the scene. We experience the presence of the world because we are part of the 'system' that constitutes such world: "to see is to enter into a universe of beings that *show themselves,* and they could not show themselves if they could not also be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words, to see an object is to come to inhabit it and to thereby grasp all things according to the sides these other things turn towards the object. […] Thus, I can see one object only insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects" (1945, 70-71). The body, thus, is essential for perception: "This is what we expressed by saying that I perceive with my body. The visual thing appears when my gaze – following the indications of the spectacle and gathering together the lights and shadows that are scattered there – approaches the illuminated surface as what the light manifests. My gaze 'knows' what such a patch of light signifies in such a context, and it understands the logic of illumination. […] To have a body is to possess a universal arrangement, a schema of all perceptual developments and of all inter-sensory correspondences beyond the segment of the world that we are actually perceiving. Thus, a thing is not actually *given* in perception, it is inwardly taken up by us, reconstituted and lived by us insofar as it is linked to a world whose fundamental structures we carry with ourselves" (Ibid., 341).

[8] In fact, Noë himself credits Merleau-Ponty as one of the figures that most inspired the enactive approach to perception (cfr. 2004, 17).

[9] The body, in other words, has its own form of intentionality, which Merleau-Ponty calls "motor intentionality" (1945/2013, pp. 112-113) For more on motor intentionality, see, e.g., Dreyfus (2004), Sachs (2015), Käufer and Chemero (2015), Matherne (2017).

On the other hand, however, I think that Noë ultimately fails to properly do justice to this tradition who influenced him, and this is particularly evident in his Virtual presence view. Especially for an enactivist, virtual presence of objects cannot be all there is to perceptual presence of the world more generally. Noë's account for this phenomenological notion should be integrated for more insights coming from the phenomenological tradition – given the obvious theoretical similarities and well-documented historical ties between phenomenology and enactivism. This paper has done precisely this: to enrich the account of perceptual presence within an enactivist framework by more explicitly articulating what perceiving as an active, moving, embodied organism is like.

## 5. Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested a new way to understand perceptual presence, that is, the way in which the world simply 'shows up' in our perceptual experience. In particular, I have tried to do so within a broadly enactivists framework. For this reason, my starting point was another prominent enactivist account of perceptual presence in the literature, namely Alva Noë's Virtual presence view. I have argued that the VIP view needs to be integrated with a more basic notion of perceptual presence, which I called 'presence of things', and can be accounted for by relying on ideas from Merleau-Ponty and Kelly. According to the VIP view, an object (with its properties) is perceptually present if at each time, each perceivable part of it is perceptually accessible (e.g. the back side of a cup, as opposed to the white juicy inside of an apple). But Merleau-Ponty, by whom Noë says to be profoundly influenced, is quite clear about the positive role that objects' *hiding* part of themselves from us plays in sustaining perceptual presence.

Therefore, to clarify and integrate Noë's proposal, I have articulated the notion of 'presence of things'. Perception necessarily presents the world against an indeterminate background, or 'horizon', which is itself positively experienced whenever we are truly engaging with the world using our perceptual capacities. Indeterminacy is responsible for presenting objects in experience as open, that is, as having things about them that are yet to be discovered. This openness is also, at the same time, normative: it is experienced as an 'invitation' to explore the object further, to discover what the object is hiding from us given that we're experiencing it always from a viewpoint. All of this, I have argued, constitutes the experience of perceptual presence in its most basic sense. As long as perceivers are sensitive to the invitations to explore carried by the indeterminate horizon against which objects are presented, we are experiencing the world as perceptually present.

Let me conclude, now, with a more general observation. Being enactivists means being somehow radical, and to have the 'courage' to play around with ideas that have been mostly considered obscure, mysterious (especially when coming from continental philosophers like, indeed, Merleau-Ponty) or not rigorous enough. Noë promises us a quite radical departure from the ordinary way of thinking about perception, but his theory is still, to an extent, trapped in a picture in which simply certain ideas cannot be expressed satisfactorily. My hope is that this paper will further the discussion about what it means to be enactivist about perception and about the phenomenology of perceptual experience, of which the notion of perceptual presence is a central part.

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