SAMUEL TODES’S ACCOUNT OF NON-CONCEPTUAL PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND ITS RELATION TO THOUGHT

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Abstract
Samuel Todes’s book, Body and World, makes an important contribution to the current debate among analytic philosophers concerning non-conceptual intentional content and its relation to thought. Todes’s relevant theses are: (1) Our unified, active body, in moving to meet our needs, generates a unified, spatio-temporal field. (2) In that field we use our perceptual skills to make the determinable perceptual objects that show up relatively determinate. (3) Once we have made the objects of practical perception determinate, we can make ‘practical perceptual judgements’ about them. Such ‘judgements’ have conditions of satisfaction, but they are non-conceptual in that they are a way of coping with an actual object in this situation, from this point of view, in this light, in this orientation, and so forth. (4) By withholding our activity, however, we can transform our practical perception into a detached, spectatorial perception of qualities that are experienced as independent of the object they qualify. (5) Thanks to our conceptual imagination, we can then treat these qualities as reidentifiable properties of reidentifiable objects that can be entertained by thought.

I. Introduction
In Body and World,1 Samuel Todes starts with Merleau-Ponty’s general description of the motor intentionality of the lived body, and goes on to develop a detailed description of the structure of the active body and of the role that that structure plays in producing the spatio-temporal field of experience. He then examines how the spatio-temporal field makes possible ‘objective knowledge’ of the objects that show up in it. Todes’s goal is to show that perception involves non-conceptual, but, nonetheless, objective forms of judgment. Thus, one can think of Body and World, as

1 Todes, Samuel, Body and World (MIT Press, 2001). (Page references are included in brackets after quotations.)
fleshing out Merleau-Ponty’s project while relating it to the current scene.

Todes’s work draws on two connected intellectual movements brought to the United States in the 40s by German refugees: Gestalt Psychology and Phenomenology. The connection between them was first pointed out in the 20s by Aron Gurwitsch. Gurwitsch worked closely with Husserl documenting this similarity until the Nazis came to power in 1933. He then spent seven years in Paris lecturing on the confluence of Gestalt Psychology and Transcendental Phenomenology, where his lectures were attended by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty subsequently transposed Gurwitsch’s Husserlian phenomenology of perception into his own existential account of the role of the lived body in experience.

Todes carries forward existential phenomenology by elaborating the Gestalt description of the field of consciousness proposed by Gurwitsch, while giving an account of the role of the lived body in perception and action that goes beyond the work of Merleau-Ponty. Thus, Todes’s book can be seen as the latest development in the philosophical movement that leads from Köhler and Husserl, to Gurwitsch, and then to Merleau-Ponty.

II. Are there two kinds of knowledge?

The philosophical tradition, has generally assumed, or, in the case of Kant, argued persuasively, that there is only one kind of intelligibility, the unified understanding we have of things when we make judgements that objectify our experience by bringing it under concepts. But there have always been others – painters, writers, historians, linguists, philosophers in the romantic tradition, Wittgensteinians, and existential phenomenologists – who have felt that there is another kind of intelligibility that gets us in touch with reality besides the conceptual kind elaborated by Kant.

Gurwitsch’s dissertation subject was ‘Studies in the Relation between Gestalt Psychology and Phenomenology’. See also his, The Field of Consciousness (Duquesne University Press, 1964).

For details on Gurwitsch’s relationship with Merleau-Ponty see Lester E. Embree’s ‘Biographical Sketch’ in Life-World and Consciousness: Essays for Aron Gurwitsch (Northwestern University Press, 1972).

Todes enters this debate by opposing the intelligibility of conception and perception. He sums up his project as follows:

Kant [does justice] neither to the claims of conceptual imagination nor to the claims of perception. Our solution is to show that there are two levels of objective experience: the ground floor of perceptually objective experience; and the upper storey of imaginatively objective experience . . . We attempt to show that the imaginative objectivity of theoretical knowledge presupposes a pre-imaginative, perceptual form of objectivity, by showing just how this is so (p. 100).

Todes’s proposed approach is timely. Donald Davidson holds that there is nothing more philosophers can say about perception than that it causes us to have beliefs and other attitudes that are directed towards the world. John McDowell, in *Mind and World*, answers that we can say at least this much more, viz. that, for perception to enter into the space of reasons, it must have conceptual content ‘all the way out’. As he puts it:

To avoid making it unintelligible how the deliverances of sensibility can stand in grounding relations to paradigmatic exercises of the understanding such as judgments and beliefs, . . . we must insist that the understanding is already inextricably implicated in the deliverances of sensibility themselves. Experiences are impressions made by the world on our senses, products of receptivity; but those impressions themselves already have conceptual content.5

Neither Davidson nor McDowell tries to describe perceptual objects as they are perceived and explain how they become the objects of thought. By calling attention to the structure of non-conceptual, practical perception and showing how its judgments can be transformed into the judgments of detached thought, Todes is able to provide a framework in which to explain how the content of perception, while not itself conceptual, can provide the basis for conception. Thus, Todes’s *Body and World* can be read as a significant response to McDowell’s *Mind and World*.

[III. Practical perception as a distinct kind of knowledge]

Todes’s account of the nature of non-conceptual content builds

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on the work of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty claims that, in perceiving things, I usually sense that they could be more clearly perceived and my body is drawn to get a firmer grip on them.

My body is geared to the world when my perception offers me a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive from the world the responses they anticipate. This maximum distinctness in perception and action defines a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general milieu for the coexistence of my body and the world.6

In Todes’s terms, we are always trying to cope more effectively, and our perception of the things around us is a response to our dissatisfaction with our lostness in the world. We find ourselves by moving so as to organize a stable spatio-temporal field in which we use our skills to make determinate the determinable objects that appear in that field. The skills we acquire then feed back into the perceptual world, which becomes more and more determinate as we learn to make more refined discriminations and thus have more reliable anticipations. Merleau-Ponty calls this feedback phenomenon the intentional arc.

But, one might well object, the objects of our perception do not look indeterminate. To explain how perception hides its essential indeterminacy, Todes introduces a phenomenological account of need. A need, whether it be for getting a maximal grip or a more specific need, is at first experienced as an indeterminate deprivation; not a simple absence. This distinction, according to Todes, is the difference between perceptual negation as a positive lack that calls for a response, and logical negation as the absence of something specific that might have been present.

In moving to meet a need, the perceiver makes both the need and the object that meets that need sufficiently determinate so that the need can be satisfied. The perceiver then understands the object as that determinate object that was needed all along. As Todes puts it:

The retroactive determination of needs by their being met covers up the fact that they first become determinate by being met. The meeting of a need first fixes it; but it is fixed retroactively as having been that determinate need all along (p. 178).

6 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 49–50.

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Thus, although perception is temporal, moving from lack to satisfaction and from indeterminacy to relative determination, after the act is completed, the dissatisfaction and the object that satisfied it are experienced as having all along been completely determinate.  

A similar tendency to read back into everyday coping the transformation that such coping bring about, takes place in our experience of acting. When Todes describes our absorbed, skilful coping, he is clear that in acting we are not trying to achieve a goal that can be spelled out in advance in propositional form. Absorbed coping does not require that the agent’s movements be governed by a representation of the action’s success conditions, as John Searle, for example, claims. Todes agrees with Merleau-Ponty who maintains that, in absorbed coping, the agent’s body is led to move so as to reduce a sense of deviation from a satisfactory gestalt without the agent being able to represent what that satisfactory gestalt will be like in advance of achieving it.

Merleau-Ponty calls the embodied coping that is directed toward objects under aspects but has no propositional success conditions, ‘motor intentionality’. Todes calls this non-conceptual, on-going coping, poise. He notes that, ‘the primary form of directed action is an intention of the body, . . . . This intention of the active body is poise in dealing with the things and persons around us’ (p. 65). Todes, however, goes further than Merleau-Ponty. He not only distinguishes the expected success conditions of wilful trying from the on-going satisfaction of the anticipations of poised perception; he adds that the continuing activity of on-going coping gives us perceptual knowledge of the things with which we are coping.

My response to an anticipated object reveals to me directly, merely by virtue of its existence, not merely the self-produced movements of my own body by which I make that response, but also, and equally immediately, that thing in respect to which I have been able to make the response. This is not true if I construe

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7 The indeterminacy of perceptual objects and their dependence on various situational and bodily capacities is argued for in detail in Sean D Kelly, ‘The non-conceptual content of perceptual experience: situation dependence and fineness of grain’, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research (with response by Christopher Peacocke), vol. LXII, no. 3 (May, 2001).


9 ‘Poise’, which usually describes a static stance, is a rather misleading term for the way a skilled perceiver moves successfully to lower the tension produced in him by the indeterminacy or disequilibrium in his perceptual field. The reader must always keep in mind that, for Todes, poise is a characteristic of skilful activity.
the primary form of directed action on the model of an act of will, . . . so that I must await the effect of actions to see whether they coincide with my previously definite intentions . . . . Poise does not, when successful, ‘coincide’ or ‘agree’ with its later ‘effects’, as does will with its achievements. . . . The success of poise is not in its execution, but in its very existence, by which the body is, to begin with, knowingly in touch with the objects around it. As soon as I am poised in my circumstances, I know . . . something about those objects to which I am doing something with my body (pp. 65–66).

For example, I can’t be skilfully coping, say dribbling a basketball, unless I am responding to the position and movement of the actual object. Successful on-going coping is, thus, itself a kind of knowledge.10

Trying to achieve conditions of satisfaction only occurs when the flow of on-going coping is somehow disturbed.

When I act in an effective, poised way, it is not merely that what I was trying to do is in agreement with what I (distinguishably) did. Rather, . . . there were not two things to compare, but only the perfect fit of me-in-my circumstances. . . . It is only in failure of response, and loss of poise, that a distinction appears between what I was trying to do and what I did (p. 70).

The retroactive transformation that occurs in the conversion of absorbed coping into wilful trying will be a helpful guide in understanding what happens in perception when the non-conceptual is converted into the conceptual. When my non-conceptual coping skill fails, and I have to make an effort to bring about what my skill should have effortlessly accomplished, it seems that, since I am trying to achieve the same end my skill was directed towards, I must have been trying to achieve that end all along. But, on careful reflection, it should be clear that trying does not simply make explicit a wilful effort to achieve a goal – both of which were already there but unnoticed. If a doorknob sticks and I have to make an effort to turn it, that does not show that I had been trying to turn it all along, i.e. that my movements have been caused by my entertaining those success conditions, any more than it shows that I believed that turning the doorknob would

10 Merleau-Ponty sees this phenomenon, but doesn’t draw out the epistemological consequences.
enable me to open the door or that I expected the door to open, even though I did, indeed, anticipate its opening in the way my body was set to walk through it. The transformation from non-conceptual, absorbed anticipations to attentive goal-directed action introduces a new element, the conceptual representation of my goal.\textsuperscript{11}

A further, more fundamental, dependence of the conceptual on the non-conceptual arises from the way both absorbed coping and attentive trying are dependent on the spatio-temporal field organized by the body. That field is produced by the way the body’s specific structure constrains and enables its coping skills.

To understand Todes’s contribution here one must first understand that the lived body is not the objective body, compose of muscles, sense organs, a brain, etc., studied by science. But it is not the subjective body either. It is important to be clear from the outset that Todes, like Merleau-Ponty, is not interested in how we feel our body when we turn our attention to it as passive contemplators in meditation, or even when we introspect the specific kinaesthetic sensations that accompany specific bodily movements. Each of these modes of reflection blocks insight into our unreflective experience of our active body.\textsuperscript{12}

According to Merleau-Ponty and Todes, we do, indeed, experience our active body, but when things are going well, we do not do so by monitoring on bodily sensations. The kinaesthetic sensations we can become aware of on reflection, tell us, in a context free way, the location, motion, etc. of each of our body’s parts. But, for Merleau-Ponty and Todes, we normally experience our active body as does an athlete in flow; that is, we sense it transparently responding as a whole to the whole situation. Todes points out that

we have . . . three phenomenological ordered levels of awareness of our active body. We sense the skilfulness of our body-activity in respect to circumstantial objects, as founded in the coordination of the activity of our various body-members in respect to one another, and this in turn as founded in the felt unity of our active body (p. 206).


It might seem that, in this quotation, Todes is claiming precisely that we do experience the location and movement of our separate body parts in order to coordinate them, but this would be like claiming that when we experience perceptual objects we experience sensations of separate qualities such as colour, shape, texture, etc. and then combine them in a judgement—a view that both Merleau-Ponty and Todes, following the Gestaltists, reject. Rather, Todes is saying that our sense of our active body’s unity is prior to, and organizes, our sense of the coordination of our body’s members.

To make his case that the structure of the active body plays a crucial role in structuring the spatio-temporal field, Todes has to go beyond Merleau-Ponty’s account of the lived body as a unified capacity for action that responds to the world’s solicitations. He does this by describing in detail just how the specific structure of our active body produces our unified experience of space and time.

Todes points out that, as the body moves forward more effectively than backwards, it opens a horizontal field that organizes experience into what can be coped with directly, what can be reached with effort, and what is over the perceptual horizon. Furthermore, the front/back asymmetry of the active body, viz. that it can cope well only with what is in front of it, makes the horizontal field temporal. In everyday coping, what has yet to be faced is experienced as in the future, what is being faced and dealt with makes up the pragmatic present, and what already has been faced and is behind us is experienced as both spatially and temporally passed. Todes concludes:

Thus through movement we do not merely notice but produce the spatio-temporal field around us, our circumstantial field, the field in which things appear to us (p. 49).

Next Todes argues that, since perceptual objects can be experienced only in a spatio-temporal field, they can never be given as fully determinate. Rather, a perceptual object has a front and a back and an inside and an outside, so that any particular experience of such

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13 But, although the structure of the spatio-temporal field depends on the structure of the lived body, Todes is no idealist. In Introduction II to Todes’s Body and World Piotr Hoffman shows how the fundamental phenomenon of balance, which is so close to us that no previous phenomenologist has described it, enables Todes to argue that the vertical field is given as independent of our action, and so to avoid the antirealism that threatens the philosophies of both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

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an object 'perceptually implies' hidden aspects soliciting further exploration and determination. For example, what I take to be a house seen from the front looks like a house not a façade. It is not as if I see what looks like a house front and I then infer that it has a back and inside. In confronting what I take to be a house, my body is solicited to go around it, while, if I take it I am seeing a façade, I embody no such readiness. Thus, while a house looks thick and as if it conceals rooms to be discovered upon further exploration, a façade, looks thin, and seems to hide only empty terrain. One, thus, has non-conceptual perceptual 'beliefs' about perceptual objects, e.g. one of my 'beliefs', in seeing a house, is my being set to walk through the front door. The intentional content of such a perceptual belief is in the motor intentionality of my bodily set, that is, in the way I am prepared to act, and do act if nothing intervenes.

This description casts an interesting light on an ongoing debate between Barry Stroud and John McDowell. Stroud, believes with Davidson that beliefs can only be justified by other beliefs, and that therefore appeals to the given can never do any justificatory work. So, on Stroud’s view, seeing a green ball involves believing and judging that I am being presented with a green ball. McDowell, anxious to avoid pure spontaneity which would seem to leave our beliefs and judgements unconnected with the world and so hanging in the void, counters with the Muller-Lyer illusion, and claims that, in seeing the illusion as an illusion, I am purely receptive. I do not judge that one line is longer than the other. Stroud, however, thinks I must be doing more than just gaping at the line; I must be judging something, perhaps that one line looks longer. But that, of course, would be a judgement about my experience, not about what’s in the world. The most McDowell will admit is that I am being tempted to judge that one line is longer, but he holds that, since I neither believe one line is longer nor that it is not, I am not judging at all. To the phenomenologist, it looks like holding that the only alternatives for describing perception are pure receptivity or pure spontaneity, leads to an antinomy in which the implausibility of each view seems to lend support to its denial.

If we accept the embodied account of perception offered by

14 Gurwitsch coined this expression. Todes uses the term on p. 196.
15 The discussion took place in a seminar given by McDowell in Berkeley, March 9, 2001.

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Merleau-Ponty and Todes, however, we have a third option. Unless, I am in a special philosophical attitude of pure contemplation, when I perceive something, my body responds to whatever is presented by being set to act appropriately. We can thus see that our active body’s response to what is presented is, neither pure sensory receptivity nor pure spontaneous mental activity, but a *readiness to respond*. Of course, this does not solve the problem both Stroud and McDowell are trying to deal with, viz. how perception can justify beliefs, but Todes’s phenomenology does suggest that getting a more accurate account of perception would be a step towards getting an answer.

According to Todes, we can begin to answer the question of the relation of perception to reasons by noting that we make *perceptual inferences* and form *perceptual judgments*. To take a Merleau-Pontian example, on the basis of past experience with similar boxes, one might mistakenly see a belted box as heavy, with the ‘perceptual implication’ that lifting it would require an effort, that is I would normally be set to use more force than necessary to pick it up. My readiness to use such force would be a mistaken ‘perceptual judgment’.

Philosophers generally agree with Aristotle and Kant that, in making a judgment, we subsume a particular under a general concept. In a *perceptual judgment*, however, although our set to lift the object is similar to our set for lifting other heavy objects, we bring to bear a specific body-set, in the example a set to lift this particular heavy object in this particular situation. As Sean Kelly puts this important point, one cannot *specify* the perceiver’s practical knowledge of an object independent of the perceiver’s actual disposition to cope with it.16

**IV. Perceptual content is non-conceptual**

We are now ready to see that motor intentionality has non-conceptual content. McDowell proposes as a test for *conceptual* content that its objects must be reidentifiable.17 He says:

> We can ensure that what we have in view is genuinely recognizable as a conceptual capacity if we insist that the very same capacity to embrace a colour in mind can in principle persist beyond the duration of the experience itself.

16 I owe this way of putting the point to Sean D Kelly. See, ‘What do we see (when we do)?’ in *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 27, no. 2, (Fall/Winter 1999).

McDowell doesn’t speak of ‘re-identification’. However, Sean Kelly argues that McDowell’s ‘recognitional capacity’ gives rise to a reidentification criterion. The reidentification criterion states that, for a subject to possess a concept of an object or property ‘x’, the subject must be able consistently to re-identify a given object or property as falling under that concept if it does.

To determine whether the content of perceptual attitudes is an alternative and irreducible kind of content, we must, therefore, ask: Does the content of motor intentionality pass the reidentification test? It is crucial, in answering this question, to realize that, as Todes points out, when objects are made determinate by skilful coping, it is our whole, unified body that gets a grip on the whole unified object in a specific unified context:

In the last analysis, . . . we can have an object in perception only by our whole perceptual field and all its contents being sensed as centred in the felt unity of our active body (p. 206).

So Todes argues that, just as practical perception involves its own sort of implications, beliefs, judgements and knowledge; it has its own nonconceptual form of reidentification. In thought, I can reidentify an object as the same object in a wide variety of possible contexts. So, for example, I recognize a chair by subsuming it under the general concept chair and can then reidentify it in any context as long as I retain that concept. In practical perception, on the contrary, my ‘reidentification’ does not depend on the intellectual act of recognizing that this is the same object I have encountered in other situations; it consists simply in my coping with the object in a way that is in fact similar to the way I have coped with it on other occasions.

I may, for example, have a body-set to deal with a particular chair in my office, and, although, that particular body-set is in fact similar to my set for dealing with other chairs, and with this chair

19 In this connection it’s interesting to note that, although persons with Anterior Amnesia (such as in the film Memento) cannot learn anything explicitly, they are able to acquire skills, both cognitive and motor, at the same rate as normal subjects. For example, one might bring one of the patients into the lab, explain Rubik’s cube to them, and have them solve it. Maybe the first day, it takes one hour. The second day, they might solve it in a 1/2 hour, but not remember having seen the puzzle before. The learning curve is the same as normals, but they do not have any explicit recognition of the task and, of course, do not reidentify the cube conceptually, although they must reidentify it in a practical perceptual way. © Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2002
on other occasions, I needn’t experience this chair as similar to other chairs or as identical with the one I sat on yesterday. I can be simply disposed to sit in it, in this situation, in my usual stiff or relaxed or seductive way. I perceptually identify the chair I’m about to sit on as my office chair simply by being set to sit in it in the way I usually sit in my office chair. I don’t reidentify it as a chair that I have encountered in other possible contexts. Indeed, while I can conceptually reidentify the chair in my office as an instance of a type of chair and as having certain characteristics that would enable me to recognize it even on the street, my perceptual identification of the chair in my office is so concrete, contextual, and tied to my current disposition to cope with it that it does not follow that I could perceptually reidentify it in other possible contexts.

Just as the body set involved in the practical perception of an object is too responsive to the specific external context to assure reidentification in other contexts, the body set for coping with the whole object makes it impossible to isolate the various characteristics of the object from their internal context as characteristics of that specific object. The characteristics of a perceptual object are, therefore, not experienced as isolable features that could be features of other possible objects, but, rather, as the aspects of that particular object. Todes points out that we always perceive aspects of an object. Merleau-Ponty, makes the same point, when he says:

It is impossible to understand perception as the imputation of a certain significance to certain sensible signs, since the most immediate sensible texture of these signs cannot be described without referring to the object they signify.20

In this connection Merleau-Ponty speaks of seeing the woolly-blueness of a carpet.21 That is, given the perceiver’s current coping capacities (which are based on skills formed in prior experiences with this carpet), the carpet looks to be a blue rich with perceptual implications, as one’s body is set to feel the carpet’s particular flexibility, weight, warmth, fuzziness, etc. On the basis of other past experiences and their correlated body-set, a block of

21 Merleau-Ponty develops this Gestalt account of the ‘synaesthesia’ of perception in Phenomenology of Perception, see especially pp. 229 and 313.
ice would presumably look a slick-hard-cold-blue. In general, the experience of any characteristic of an object of practical perception is tied to the perceiver’s holistic body-set. As Merleau-Ponty notes:

Cézanne said that one could see the velvetiness, the hardness, the softness, and even the odour of objects. My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.22

Thus, the aspects of the objects of practical perception, such as the woolly-warm-flexible-blueness of this carpet, are so contextually determined that they cannot be seen as the features of other possible objects, and so could not be reidentified in a different object; yet the perceiver’s anticipations are determinate enough to have conditions of satisfaction. That is, the perceiver anticipates the experience of this warm-flexible-blue carpet. It follows that the intentional content by means of which the aspects of perceptual objects are perceived must be non-conceptual.

But, that leaves us with the troubling question: If perception is, indeed, holistic and non-conceptual all the way in, how are we able to entertain propositional beliefs about isolable perceptual objects and their isolable properties and, more generally, how is thought able to make judgments on the basis of perceptual experience?

The objects of thought must be context-free objects and the context-free properties of such objects, but it is important to see that, just as in absorbed coping there is neither an act of trying nor a representation of a goal, so, in practical perception, I do not encounter context-independent objects nor reidentifiable properties or features of the object I am perceiving. But if the context-free and thus reidentifiable objects and properties that thought takes up are neither perceptual objects nor the aspects of perceptual objects, how do the objects of practical perception become the objects of abstract thought?

V. How perception is related to thought

According to Todes, the transformation of contextually determined perceptual objects with integrated aspects into decontextualized concep-

tual objects with isolable features takes place in two stages. To begin with, the spectatorial attitude, by deactivating one’s bodily set to cope, transforms the integrated aspects of the perceptual object into a set of isolable qualities. To show how this is possible, Todes points out that practical perception takes place in three stages:

1. In the first stage we prepare our self to perceive an object by getting into a proper position or attitude in respect to it.
2. Having prepared our self to perceive it, we next ready the object to be perceived. This is done by ‘getting at’ the object in some essentially preliminary, tentative, and easily reversible way which allows us to test, with comparatively light consequences, the desirability of going on to fully perceive the object.
3. In the third stage we finally perceive the object (p. 273).

When we inhibit stage three, Todes claims, we transform practical perception so as to produce sensuous abstractions. ‘In . . . cases of skillfully inhibited perception . . . one becomes aware of qualities rather than things’ (p. 274).

Thus, the contemplative subject no longer experiences perceptual objects through their integrated aspects, but rather experiences collections of qualities. But, since he still experiences himself as in the world, the spectator still experiences objects in a shared context with other objects, and so as stable collections of stable qualities. Such objects and qualities are precisely the reidentifiable elements required by thought.

In the spectatorial attitude, if I come across the same quality in several objects I can reidentify it as the one I saw before. It is as if one held a painter’s colour chart up to Merleau-Ponty’s woolly-blue carpet and found that the carpet’s colour matched colour chip #29, that was not woolly at all, and, indeed, also matched the tangy-blue of blue berries and the icy-blue of ice. But such conceptual content is still not in what John McDowell calls the space of reasons.

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24 If the spectator were to assume an even more detached attitude, from outside the world, so to speak, as an impressionist painter does, the object would be isolated from the context it shares with other objects. Then, the object’s qualities would lose their perceptual constancy. What one would then see is captured by Monet’s paintings of the Rouen cathedral at various times of day. The painter shows how the cathedral’s purely spectatorially perceived colour-qualities change with changes in the colour of the illumination.
To think about objects, requires more than simply being able to reidentify their properties. Much of our thinking concerns possible objects in possible situations that need never in fact occur. So Todes next explains how our imagination enables us to understand the products of spectatorial decomposition as possible objects with possible properties. Once we contemplate an object so that our unified and unifying body is no longer involved, our imagination enables us to conjure up the object in various possible contexts, and to imagine the qualities we have disengaged as the qualities of other possible objects. That is, we can imagine the object we are contemplating as a type of object that could be encountered and reidentified on other occasions, and we can conceive of it as having a set of reidentifiable features each of which could be a feature of other objects.25

Thanks to our disengagement and our imagination, the object of perception is transformed from an actually existing object into a possible object about which we can form hypotheses and, on the basis of which, we can make inferences, i.e. we have turned the perceptual object into an object of thought. And, just as when we abandon absorbed coping and act attentively, it seems that we have been trying to achieve a goal all along, and, when we make our needs determinate by satisfying them, we seem to have had those determinate needs all along, so, when we abandon practical perception for the detached, imaginative attitude in which we think and do philosophy, it seems that the objects of practical perception must have been objects of thought all along.

Once the stages by which the body turns the objects of practical perception into the objects of thought has been covered up by detached philosophical reflection, McDowell, like Kant, can

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25 Such imaginative representations, nonetheless, depend on our embodied involvement. For only by reference to a character-of-this-world, as distinct from objects-in-this-world, can we have any ground for holding such imaginative verbal beliefs about, or undertaking such imaginative purposive action in respect to objects not in our perceptual field. For such long-range suppositions and purposes pre-suppose that the concrete as well as formal kinds of order self-evidently manifest to us within our perceptual field (in virtue of our centrally habit-forming active body), generally hold also in the apparently place-less regions beyond our perceptual horizon – merely in virtue of the fact that these regions are also regions in the same world as the perceptually present region. (135)

This important qualification is part of Todes's argument that, although neither of the two modes of intelligibility he distinguishes can be reduced to the other, embodied perception is more basic than disembodied thought. I cannot, however, deal with this important issue within the space of this essay.

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conceive of only two alternatives: either perception is so radically non-conceptual as to be totally outside the space of reasons and, therefore, blind, or, if it is to enable us to form beliefs and make inferences, it must be as conceptual as thought itself. McDowell, therefore, can understand perception as the result of a causal, mechanical interaction of the physical body and the world, but he holds that what one passively receives in perception must be directly available for forming judgments and so must be permeated by conceptual content. There is no place in such a view for the body’s motor intentionality and for the perceptual objects that it reveals. But, as we have now seen, Todes shows how, thanks to our bodily dispositions, perceptual objects are articulated without being conceptually articulated. Conception is then accomplished by means of a detached, spectatorial perception that can transform these articulations into decontextualized qualities, so that these qualities, in turn, can be represented as possible features of possible objects by the imagination, and thus serve as material for conceptual thought.

Todes concludes:

Phenomenological analyses have shown that perception and imagination are radically different. We have two irreducibly different ways of experiencing things; by anticipating them; and by immediate production of them. Neither capacity is derivable from the other. Yet we are not bound to understand one in terms of the other. We can pass back and forth between them as modes of understanding (p. 201).

Conclusion

We have seen that the embodied subject is able to meet its needs by developing more and more refined skills for coping with the various determinable objects that show up in its spatio-temporal field. We have also seen that the perceiver’s non-conceptual readiness to cope with the world and the things in it exhibits the perceptual equivalents of belief, inference and judgment. Finally we have seen that, for ongoing coping to take place at all, it must be continually succeeding in getting a grip on its object. Todes, therefore, claims that the perceiver has practical objective knowledge of the world and the objects in it. He sums up this crucial claim as follows:

We perceive always that something is so. ‘I see a chair’, implies
‘I see that there is a chair’. . . Perceptual determinations make sense only in the context of a judgment (p. 217).

This may sound at first like a concession to Stroud’s claim that perceiving is judging and therefore not purely receptive, as well as a concession to McDowell’s claim that, in order to enter the space of reasons, perception must be receptive yet somehow conceptual, but, we must remember that, for Todes, perceptual knowledge is not decontextualized knowledge. It is the result of a specific movement from need to satisfaction. Successfully coping with an object, perceptually ‘justifies’ the perceptual ‘judgment that’ there is, in fact, an object that satisfies and retroactively makes determinate the need that motivated the coping. For example, as I enter my office, I ‘judge’ that coping with this, as yet indeterminate object, as my chair will give me a grip on my circumstances. That is, I’m set to exercise my specific skill for sitting on this chair in these circumstances. ‘I perceive that there is a chair’, means, where practical perception is concerned, that my set to cope with the chair by sitting on it is successful.

Todes sums up as follows:

A perceptual judgement is an argument. . . . We have . . . found the primary form of this argument. It is a three-stage motivational argument: from our ineluctable unity of need which prompts all our activity, through our consequent finding of some unity of object, to a concluding unity of satisfaction derived from this object. All perceptual sense makes sense in the context of this argument (p. 217).

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