Merleau-Ponty and Standpoint Theory

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1 The Problem(s) with Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory is a variety of feminist epistemology that has been active since the 1980s. Its two central tenets are (1) that knowledge is necessarily situated within a socio-political context, and (2) that certain socio-political positions or standpoints are epistemically privileged when it comes to "reveal[ing] the truth of social reality" (Hekman, 1997, 349).[1] Over the course of its history, standpoint theory has encountered a number of problems which have revealed stark divisions among its supporters over certain fundamental philosophical commitments (e.g., a commitment to realism about empirical claims). In this chapter, I sketch out a phenomenological account of perception that can begin to address some of these problems, drawn largely from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

There are two major issues that I believe a Merleau-Pontyan view of perception can help alleviate. One is that there has never been a thorough articulation of a theory of perception underlying standpoint theory's central claims. This is surprising, since arguments in favor of standpoint theory often emphasize that occupying a certain standpoint enables one to *see* the world differently. Arguably the most influential early articulation of standpoint theory, Nancy Hartsock's, 1983 book *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* describes a standpoint as follows: "the concept of a standpoint rests on the fact that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well intentioned one may be, the real relations

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[1] See also Crasnow, 2008, Sec. 3. Notably, Crasnow (2013) later introduces a third feature she refers to as "the achievement thesis," but that discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter.

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of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (Hartsock, 1983). Later theorists take up this language of *visibility* in explaining what is meant by "standpoint"—Lorraine Code, for instance, writes that from different standpoints "the world looks quite different from the way it might look 'from nowhere'" (Code, 1996, 196).

The strong implication throughout the early literature in which a "standpoint" is defined is that epistemic standpoints have perceptual underpinnings; it is taken to be intuitive that people occupying different social positions will literally *see* the world differently, and that these perceptual differences are meant to help explain how different epistemic standpoints could arise. And yet, feminist standpoint theorists never discuss the underlying theory of perception in any detail. This chapter aims to provide some suggestions (or at least some helpful nudging) towards what such a theory might look like.

The other problem that a Merleau-Pontyan account of perspectival perception may be able to address is the complex tension between standpoint theory's two central theses[2]: on the one hand, knowledge is always and necessarily sociopolitically situated, and on the other, certain ways of being thusly situated can be *better* or *worse* when it comes to understanding the reality of certain social phenomena. The problem is that knowledge being necessarily situated seems to make it difficult to account for one single reality or world about which some particular group could be epistemically privileged (and then, of course, there are problems with defining such groups in the first place).[3] In particular, if we affirm that there is not one single standpoint that one monolithic group known as "women" occupy (as numerous theorists compellingly argued in the 80 s and 90 s),[4] it becomes especially difficult to see how it wouldn't be the case that (as Alison Wylie puts it) "standpoints fragment into myriad individual perspectives," and standpoint theory reduces to a sort of empty relativism (Wylie, 2004, 341).

Thus, there is some confusion about how it could be possible for different standpoints to have different but nonetheless real experiences of some singular external reality in the first place, let alone how there could be some mechanism by which certain standpoints are privileged. Susan Hekman calls this issue the "central problem" for feminist standpoint theory: "given multiple standpoints… how can we talk about 'better accounts of the world,' 'less false stories'? And, indeed, how can we talk about accounts of the world at all if the multiplicity of standpoints is, quite literally, endless?" (Hekman, 1997, 358).

As Miranda Fricker points out, there seems to be a "need for an epistemology which gives a strong role to socio-political values," but which nonetheless maintains

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[2] This problem is most famously articulated by Susan Hekman, in her critical essay "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited" (1997).

[3] Hekman points out that "Originally, feminist standpoint theorists claimed that the standpoint of women offers a privileged vantage point for knowledge. But if the differences among women are taken seriously and we accept the conclusion that women occupy many different standpoints and thus inhabit many different realities, this thesis must be reexamined" (Hekman, 1997, 349).

[4] See e.g. Hooks, 1984, Grillo, 1995 for compelling critiques of this sort of essentialist view.

a realist stance about beliefs drawn from experience (Fricker, 1994, 95). I'm not going to defend this point about realism at length in this chapter, but I am generally in agreement with Fricker that feminist epistemology needs a realist account of empirical belief. At the very least, the ability to make meaningful political claims in general would seem to depend upon one's ability to make "empirical claims about real states of affairs in the world." Fricker further notes that "the backbone of [feminist politics] is a set of beliefs about real states of affairs and, in particular, real experiences had by women" (Fricker, 1994, 99).

I believe the second problem (the tension between standpoint theory's two central theses) is at least partially derivative of the first (the lack of an adequate account of the perceptual basis for standpoint epistemology). The recognition of "myriad individual perspectives" need not lead to the aforementioned fragmentation, if we can square the recognition of such perspectives with a realism about perceptual experience. Such a view would have to explain how distinct, sometimes even apparently conflicting, perspectives might nonetheless be reconciled as revealing genuine aspects of a single real world to which they all belong. Merleau-Ponty can help us begin to resolve these issues. He does so by providing an account of perspectival perception that includes a multiplicity of different perceptual standpoints (all of which nonetheless put us in touch with a single external world), and explains how it could be that some standpoints are better than others when it comes to accessing certain features of this world.

2   Merleau-Pontyan Horizons

Most discussions of perspectival perception assume that perspective is primarily a matter of spatial orientation. Even when discussing the difference between distance conceived of as a standardized spatial measurement (e.g. 200 ft.) and distance conceived of in a more practical sense, as is typical of a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenological account (e.g. the need to walk towards something in order to see it better),[5] the presumption is that a "point of view" is characterized by spatial orientation. Ultimately I will argue that this view of perspectival perception should include not only spatial orientation but also one's historical, cultural, political, and personal situation—but it is useful to first understand Merleau-Ponty's account of the spatial aspect of perspectival perception in order to fully grasp the significance of his view of perspective more generally.

In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume points out that there seems to be a difference between what we see from our particular perspective and what the objects of our perception are supposed to be in themselves: he claims that "the table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it" (Hume, 2007, XII.1). This phenomenon is called "perspectival variation," and Hume—like

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[5] See e.g. Kelly, 2005, 34.

many other philosophers after him—takes this observation to be sufficient to prove that we do not perceive the object itself, since the object itself does not change in size. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, takes perspectival variation to be a feature of what it is to perceive objects themselves, rather than a sign that we are somehow cut off from those objects by the limitations of our particular point of view. For Merleau-Ponty, perception itself is characterized by the dynamicism of perspectival variation, and tied to "the object itself" as that of which every perspectival moment is a particular expression.

The kind of perspectival dynamicism that characterizes perception for Merleau-Ponty is not unusual or unfamiliar: we walk around things or turn things over in our hands all the time, which involves a continuous series of perspectival variations. "To the extent that I move around the cube," Merleau-Ponty writes, "I see the front face, which was a square, lose its shape and then disappear, while the other sides appear and each in turn become square" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 210). Merleau-Ponty is insistent that we should not understand this process as a set of discrete instances, or some determinate number of perspectives which we "add together" in our minds in order to understand the object: "I do not have one perspectival view, then another, along with a link established by the understanding: rather, each perspective passes into the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 344). There is a continual development of our familiarity with the object through our ongoing exploration, as we turn it over in our hands or walk around it, or otherwise engage with it further. Indeed, it is this continual development through our bodily engagement with the world that characterizes perception in general for Merleau-Ponty, and "each appearance of the thing that falls before our perception is still nothing but an invitation to perceive more" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 242).

According to Merleau-Ponty, each perspectival moment "passes into" the others in the sense that each perspective is already present (more or less indeterminately) in the horizonal structure of all the others. Of course, the concept of the "horizon" is central to the phenomenological tradition, and there are sometimes subtle but substantive differences in how different phenomenologists treat it. In the *Phenomenology of Perception,* the "horizons" of an object refer to the hidden or implicit aspects of the object that nonetheless play a positive role in one's experience of the object. For a relatively simple example: when I look at a coffee cup, I do not experience the cup as only having the sides that are immediately visible to me—I experience the cup as having sides that are not currently turned towards me, sides that I would see if I turned the cup around, or if I were sitting on the other side of the table. The "horizonal structure" of the object includes not only the side I am facing, but also its other sides, and all the other possible ways of viewing or interacting with the object.

When we engage with an object in perception, we have a grasp on its horizonal structure from a particular point of view: certain aspects of the object are presented fairly determinately, in the foreground, while other aspects of it remain or are pushed into the background, indeterminate but nonetheless present in our perceptual experience. For Merleau-Ponty, these indeterminate features are present in our experience of the object, not something we infer, project, or otherwise intellectually

constitute on the basis of what's in the foreground, so to speak.[6] And when Merleau-Ponty says that we *pass into* one perspective from another, the idea is that we are engaged in a continued exploration of the object, of the same horizonal structure, but with a new part of it in focus, and the prior perspective pushed into the background.

The best way to describe this process is not as a sort of summation of an increasing quantity of perspectives, from which we construct a model or representation of the object in our minds. For Merleau-Ponty, it is an ongoing process of exploration and familiarization with the object itself that takes place over time. Every perspectival moment of the object is a direct engagement with the horizonal structure of the object and thus an engagement with the object itself, and the object is present in every perspective on it, more or less indeterminately. The perspectival structure of perception renders perception always to some degree indeterminate, but it is also what makes perception possible in the first place. Perspective, for Merleau-Ponty, is the means by which things "unveil" or "show themselves" to us in perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 70).

This is an important feature of Merleau-Ponty's view that distinguishes it from Husserl's earlier discussion of the concept of the "horizon" in perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the sides of the object that are not immediately presented in my visual field are nonetheless actually already present in my experience, however indeterminately, not as expectations or projections I have formed about the object but as part of the "positive ambiguity" or indeterminacy[7] that is built into perceptual experience itself.[8] Thus, Merleau-Ponty adopts a sort of direct perspectival realism: each perspectival view may present us with a different aspect of the world, or arrangement of its horizonal structure, but what we see is the world itself through our particular perspective.[9]

Given that each perspective includes a more-or-less indeterminate presentation of the object, one might wonder whether some perspectives might be more determinate than others, or whether the object "reveals" or "unveils" itself *more* to certain perspectives. Intuitively, the answer would seem to be yes: seeing someone from 10 feet away is *better* than seeing them from 100 feet away. You can see more detail, recognize them (or not) more easily, even see what kind of mood they might be in or what their attitude or behavior towards you is much more easily at 10 feet than at

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[6] For further discussion on this point, see Kelly, 2005, 79. Here I am following Kelly's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's account of horizons and spatial perspective in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which I am generally in agreement with.

[7] Merleau-Ponty insists very early on in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "there is an *indeterminate vision*, a *vision of something or other*, and, if taken to the extreme, that which is behind my back is not without visual presence… We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 6–7).

[8] See Kelly, 2005, 79–81 for further elaboration of this point.

[9] Reading Merleau-Ponty as a "realist" is not an uncontroversial position, and I have made more detailed arguments in favor of it elsewhere. What I have in mind is similar to the "unproblematic realism" that both Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus attribute to Merleau-Ponty, and to Heidegger as well.

100. In this sense, distance (or spatial orientation more generally) is not just a descriptive but also a *normative* feature of perceptual experience.[10]

For Merleau-Ponty, an object's horizontal structure is normatively ordered: to be familiar with the object is to know which perspectives to privilege under which circumstances, and to feel a certain tension drawing you to take up those particular perspectives. If you are standing too far away from a sign to read it, you feel compelled to move closer (and may even do so without thinking about it); your distance from the sign is not just a descriptive but also a normative feature of perceptual experience. The normative character of an object's horizontal structure determines which of the possible perspectival orientations towards the object I *should* take up, and I *feel* that "should" as a tension, insofar as my current position deviates from the norm. It is important to emphasize that this tension is felt, and does not consist of a "judgment" but rather the sensing of a certain call to action: according to Merleau-Ponty, what I perceive when I perceive the distance to an object, e.g., is a need to move closer or farther away in order to see the object better. Merleau-Ponty (2012) writes:

> For each object as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope. (315–316)

This tendency towards "maximum visibility" applies beyond relative distance, and beyond visibility too. There are some obvious examples related to sound, for instance: imagine repositioning yourself relative to a speaker system to optimize your listening experience, or the frustrating experience of having the worst seat in a symphony hall.

Each perspectival moment is "ambiguous," in the sense that it involves both the explicit perspectival view of the moment, but it also presents, implicitly and with varying degrees of indeterminacy, all the other perspectival variations on the object. Even the "maximum visibility" state remains ambiguous, because it is impossible to have every aspect of or every perspective on the object in view determinately all at once. This is why, if we want to familiarize ourselves with a building, e.g., we do not simply stand in one "optimal" position before it satisfied (or, for that matter, simply ask to see the blueprints); we walk around it, we explore inside it, and to really "know" the building, perhaps we live in it for a while. We do this because we understand that a single perspective is not the only

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[10] It is worth noting that this normativity arises as a result of the way in which the structure of the object itself interacts with our own structure, that is, the actual physical structure of our living bodies. The object draws us to interact with it in a way that allows it to reveal itself the most *to us*, given our particular manner of embodiment in the world (which includes things like our size, physical capabilities, perceptual apparatus, etc). The normative character of an object's horizontal structure is a feature that belongs to the object, but (like the object's other features!) it is revealed through our particular embodied interactions with it.

informative or legitimate one to have, and is insufficient for really familiarizing ourselves with something.

These further perspectives do not merely "add up to" the complete object: they give us a better intuitive sense of which perspectives to privilege as the normative ones in any variety of circumstances, and of the internal horizontal structure of the object on the whole. Paris, for Merleau-Ponty, is not simply a "thousand-sided object," and that's not just because it has indefinably more than one thousand sides (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 293). To become familiar with Paris, or to become familiar with any object, involves getting to know it, to know your way around it, to recognize its own style, what it demands of you, and in a sense, its own point of view, and thus to understand how it fits into the world that is home to this object and all others, and to you yourself as well (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 71).

3   Socially-Situated Perspective

Importantly, perspective is not just a matter of spatiality for Merleau-Ponty. He describes the relationship between the world and the experiencing subject as an "intentional arc," writing that "perceptual life… is underpinned by an 'intentional arc' that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 137). Our perceptual experience has *meaning* for us because of the way our particular position in historical time, or within a culture or a political body, or even within our own personal history, reveals certain aspects of the world to us. This is not because we do some kind of post-hoc interpretation of our experience in light of all of these things; rather, we engage with the world in perception *through* "our human milieu."

One example that makes this fairly obvious is language perception. There is a profound difference between hearing a language that you know, that has meaning for you, and non-linguistic sounds. Wittgenstein makes a similar point when talking about the visual difference between written language you understand and mere marks on the page—or even written language that is familiar to you but which is printed as a mirror-image of itself (Wittgenstein, 2001, 169). If perception were only a matter of spatial features, there should be no difference—a sound is a sound and a mark is a mark. In order for us to explain how we perceive the world the way we do qua language, whether written or spoken, we have to include culture and personal history in the story.

There are plenty of other examples where certain things have different meanings to different people depending on their particular social, historical, political, or personal circumstances. For Merleau-Ponty, even on the most basic level, perception is not a matter of bare sensory features—we perceive things in terms of how they solicit our behavior (e.g. chairs are for sitting, coffee mugs are for drinking). Komarine Romdenh-Romluc puts the point this way: "One's surrounding environment is immediately presented in perception as 'requiring' or 'suggesting' a certain

sort of behavior such that the perceiver is not confronted with things that have merely objective qualities such as size, shape, etc., but with entities that are edible, throwable, kickable, and so on" (Romdenh-Romluc, 2007, 45). All of this, of course, depends on our own personal histories and skills, as well as our cultural and historical situation—and, given certain differences between our respective situations, something that appears e.g. "edible" to me may not for you.

As was mentioned earlier, Merleau-Ponty makes it clear at numerous points in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the objects themselves consist of, and are present in, every possible perspective one could have on them. But this point takes on a new significance when we consider that this infinitude of perspectives, all of which present a real aspect of the object, are not only spatial but also socio-historical in nature. For Merleau-Ponty, the account of perspective should also apply to this richer notion, beyond the merely spatial. Thus, I want to make the following four claims, which apply what we have already said about spatial perspective to socio-historical perspective as well:

1. Just as our perspective is always limited spatially—there is always more to see just around the bend—so too is it limited in this socio-historical sense. In short, there are always more ways for something to have significance for someone than I will ever know. As with spatial perspective, this sense of something's significance extending beyond my own immediate experience of it (having "unseen sides," as it were) nonetheless plays an important role in my experience, and lends it a sense of reality or of belonging to an external world that will always outstrip my individual grasp.
2. Just as the object itself is really present to us (however indeterminately) through our particular spatial perspective, so too is it really present to us (however indeterminately) through our particular socio-historical perspective, as we engage with the aspects of the world that that particular socio-historical perspective reveals.
3. Just as an object's horizontal structure has a normative element spatially speaking (seeing someone from 10 feet away is better than trying to see them from 100), similarly there are socio-historical perspectives that are better than others for perceiving certain aspects of the world. Language is an obvious example: someone fluent with a certain language will be much more adept at perceiving facts like "what is written on this sign" in the relevant language than someone who is not.
4. Therefore, there are ways the world *really is* that I perhaps do not have the best view on, or that I may never actually see, because of my particular socio-historical perspective (but that someone else might!)

For a more complex example, I imagine the Parthenon does not look the same to me as it did to an Ancient Greek, and this is not only because of age and decay. It may be awe inspiring to both of us, but in very different ways, and the cultural meaning it has for each of us is different. The complex role the Parthenon played in the lives of contemporaneous Greeks would have been much more obvious to the Ancient Greek than to me: the religious significance of its status as a temple to Athena, for

example, would have been much more concrete for someone living within that culture at the time. For me, that aspect of the Parthenon's significance certainly remains and influences my experience of it thousands of years later, but with a certain mysteriousness and distance from its original practical use. In that sense, the Ancient Greek's perspective is *better* for understanding the original religious significance of the Parthenon (which is surely a real, historical fact about it). Similarly, both I and the Ancient Greek would certainly have a sense of the Parthenon representing a triumph of Greek architecture. But the nature of that triumph would have a much more current and perhaps political significance (and perhaps elicit feelings of patriotic pride) for the contemporaneous Greek. My own experience is distanced from those features of the Parthenon, but includes a sense of its sheer awesomeness as a human construction that was first built thousands of years ago, and its status as a symbol of Western civilization in general.

Since I am not and could never be an Ancient Greek person, I cannot have the same perceptual experience as they did, and their perspective is thus much better at revealing the Parthenon in its original significance to the Ancient Greeks than mine is. But both my experience and that of the Ancient Greek are part of the horizonal structure of the Parthenon. When I experience the Parthenon, the experiences of the Ancient Greeks are present, however vaguely, on the periphery of my experience: the sense of the Parthenon as having deep religious and political significance to contemporaneous Greeks (the actual experience of which I nonetheless do not have immediate access to myself) is part of what lends it a certain mysteriousness and profundity to my own experience of it. The experiences of the Ancient Greeks are some of the "implicit" or "hidden" aspects of the Parthenon, and this is part of what gives my experience its meaning. According to Merleau-Ponty, I am "always surrounded by indeterminate horizons that contain other points of view" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 141), and those other points of view—however indeterminate to me—contribute to the rich socio-cultural significance embedded in my own perceptual experience.[11]

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty thinks that history as an academic discipline or field of inquiry would be impossible if there were not "overlap" between my experience and the experience of Ancient Greeks, even given the many intervening years of remove between our lived perspectives. Merleau-Ponty (2012) writes:

> "[Historical knowledge of the past] would be impossible if I did not have—through the intermediary of my society, my cultural world, and their horizons—at least a virtual communication with [past civilizations], if the place of the Athenian Republic or of the Roman Empire was not somewhere marked on the borders of my own history, if they were not established there like some particular individuals to meet, indeterminate though preexisting, and if I did not find the fundamental structures of history within my own life. The social world is already there when we come to know it or when we judge it." (379)

The "indeterminate though preexisting" connections we have to people in different socio-historical positions (which includes not only past civilizations, but also

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[11] Sartre makes a not-entirely-dissimilar point in *Being and Nothingness* when he claims that we are always "situated in a human space" when we perceive (Sartre, 1956, 372).

current cultures that are not our own) is what makes our attempts to understand "the world of the Ancient Greeks" possible, and its present-yet-indeterminate character is perhaps what makes that attempt at understanding such a provocative project that spawns entire subdisciplines of academic study (not to mention the humorous trope in fiction and other media of historical figures time-traveling to the present and being appalled at how much we've gotten wrong).

Merleau-Ponty writes that "we have learned in individual perception not to conceive of our perspectival views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are gathered together in the thing. Similarly, we must learn to find the communication of consciousnesses in a single world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 369). In a somewhat literal sense we can never actually possess each other's experiences directly: each person's individual perspective is unique, and the way the world reveals itself to you will be different from how it reveals itself to me, even if our particular personal histories are very much alike. Merleau-Ponty sometimes refers to this as a sort of "necessary solipsism," but the fact that our unique individual perspectives present us with a world that outstrips our individual grasp, and that (more or less indeterminately) includes the perspectives of others, presents "the absurdity of a solipsism-shared-by-many, and such is the situation that must be understood" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 376).

Despite our "enclosed" individual perspectives, other people's perspectives—perhaps drastically different from my own—are present to me, more or less indeterminately, as "other sides" of the stuff of my own experience. Like the other sides of the coffee cup, other people's perspectives are part of the horizonal structure of an object or phenomenon and lend a certain depth and significance to my own experience. Put another way, my own perspectival experience implies others.[12] This is part of what it is to engage with real (non-imaginary, non-hallucinatory) objects in perception: those objects are intersubjectively available, and we experience them as such. We live in the same world as the things we perceive, and in the same world as each other—your experiences and my experiences are of the same world, and we meet up with it and with each other through and in virtue of our particular perspectives.

4   Consequences for Standpoint Theory

We can thus begin to get a sense of how a Merleau-Pontyan account of perception might help ground the standpoint epistemological picture. Earlier in this chapter, we laid out the task in the form of two main questions to be answered:

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[12] Merleau-Ponty writes that "Every other person exists for me as an irrecusable style or milieu of coexistence" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 382). Merleau-Ponty also somewhat humorously remarks that "solipsism could only be rigorously true of someone who succeeded in tacitly observing his existence without being anything and without doing anything, which is surely impossible, since to exist is to be in the world. In his reflective retreat, the philosopher cannot avoid dragging others with him" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 378).

1. How is it possible for different perspectives (which ground different standpoints) to have different but nonetheless real experiences of a single external reality?
2. How is it possible that some perspectives can be *better* than others when it comes to certain social phenomena?

On a Merleau-Pontyan view, we can reconcile the recognition of "myriad individual perspectives" with a realism about the experience that those perspectives provide. For Merleau-Ponty, it is not a problem if each perspective is incomplete, partial, or even apparently conflicting with other perspectives: this is what we would expect of our socio-politically informed perspectival access to the world. Because our access is always "limited" by our particular perspective, our point of view might look much different from someone else's, but it is also the *means by which* we access the same world as everybody else—and the wide variety of others' perspectives is the means by which our experience of the world takes on the sort of significance that it does. Merleau-Ponty writes that "we are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, 370). In other words, the proliferation of standpoints need not lead us into an unacceptably relativistic framework, as long as we are able to conceive of each of these standpoints as giving whoever occupies it access to some particular aspect of or a unique access point into a singular, real, shared world.

That unique access point will be characterized in terms of the subject's socio-political situation, among other factors, and standpoints will have a normative structure. This can help make sense of standpoint epistemology's claim that people with a particular socio-political position may have privileged access to "social truth," or at least some part of it. Point (4) above—the idea that there are ways the world really is that I may not have the best view on due to my particular situation—leads directly into Hartsock's claim that there are some perspectives from which certain social phenomena are just not visible: perhaps one person's particular perspective allows something to show up for them in a way it just doesn't for someone else. In the same way that a certain spatial orientation can be better or worse for perceiving an object, certain socio-political situations are better or worse for perceiving social phenomena.[13]

For Merleau-Ponty, perspectives can be epistemologically privileged insofar as they are grounded on a perspective that provides the subject with a better grip on the phenomenon in question. In the same way that it is easier to read a sign from closer up, it is sometimes easier to "read" a social situation from a socio-political position that puts one "closer" to the phenomenon. Being treated as a woman, e.g., might make it easier to recognize certain gendered phenomena in the world, or how

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[13] This view of perceptual experience also dovetails very nicely with an epistemic approach Lorraine Code calls "Normative Realism" in her recent book *Epistemic Responsibility*. In particular, Code's view emphasizes the possibility of dramatically different but similarly accurate socially situated, perspectival "takes" on a situation, while maintaining that such "takes" can be better or worse "both morally and epistemically" insofar as they are more or less accurate, and appropriately *responsive,* to the object or situation in question (Code, 2020, 139–141).

pervasive certain gendered problems are.[14] The Ancient Greek is in a better position to grasp and understand the original religious and political significance of the Parthenon, due to the immediate relevance of that fact to their own everyday life—similarly, people who are generally treated as "women" are likely to be in a better position to grasp and understand sexist or gendered phenomena in the world, insofar as it presents itself as immediately relevant to them in their everyday lives in a way that it does not for people who are not typically read as "women."[15]

Some immediate examples that come to mind are the pervasiveness of public harassment and catcalling, and the effect that those phenomena have on one's perception and movement through public spaces. The actual perceptual experience of walking alone at night through public areas (an empty parking lot, say) has a much different character for those subject to sexist harassment or even violence than it does for those who are not.[16] Other possible examples include more subtle effects of sexist societal norms, such as the expectation that women handle domestic chores. Several recent surveys, combined with time-use studies, show that men in heterosexual domestic relationships often incorrectly believe that they are shouldering an equal portion of the domestic labor, whereas their partners have a somewhat more accurate grip on the continuing reality of the unequal distribution of domestic labor (even when both partners work full time).[17] It is hard to explain this disparity in their respective beliefs without recognizing that people in a certain socio-political position (i.e. women partners of heterosexual men) can see the situation somewhat better from where they are standing, so to speak.

Merleau-Ponty's view also has the strong advantage of responding to concerns about the "difference problem." Much of the discussion of this problem involves the apparent assumption of early standpoint theories that "woman" is a social identity category that consists of one monolithic standpoint, which ignores the experiences of women who do not fit the dominant view of what a "woman" is (typically white, heterosexual, cisgender, of a certain class, cultural, and geographical background

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[14] Note also that this claim does not assume that *just* occupying a certain socio-political position (e.g. "woman") is *enough* to make one an "expert perceiver" of the relevant phenomena; it might be the case, as several feminist standpoint theorists have pointed out, that some kind of increased political awareness is also an important factor.

[15] Notably, this does not require that there actually be some monolithic category of "women" who all occupy exactly the same standpoint in every respect; rather, every relevant individual's perspective and socio-political position can be different, and yet all of these different positions will include the particular way(s) in which they are treated as "women" by society at large.

[16] Arguably this effect can be understood as an instance of what Iris Marion Young calls "inhibited intentionality," in which our capacity for bodily engagement with the world is complicated or frustrated by a simultaneous sense of hesitancy or restriction in the face of potential harm. In this way, "[women's] bodies project an aim to be enacted but at the same time stiffen against the performance of the task" (Young, 2005, 34–38). On a Merleau-Pontyan view, that would make for a much different experience of the parking lot — and that experience itself is a fairly common social phenomenon that women are likely to have privileged perceptual access to.

[17] See Yavorsky et al., 2015, Miller, 2015, Schaeffer, 2019, Barroso, 2021, and others. See also Miller, 2020 regarding the unequal distribution of home educational responsibilities during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

and so on). On Merleau-Ponty's view, the claim that all women would share a single monolithic standpoint is obviously false: a huge variety of factors integrate to form each individual's unique way of meeting up with the world through their particular perspective. Nonetheless, there will be some interests and concerns more likely to be held by people who read as "women,"[18] largely due to their actual lived experiences of being treated as women by the rest of the world. Thus, "woman" need not name a single monolithic identity or standpoint in order to still refer to a relevant set of common gendered experiences that condition the individual perspectives of people who are treated as "women."

Merleau-Ponty's view can do this while also maintaining that there are aspects of the world that are revealed to one standpoint better than another, and that those aspects of the world are real. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no tension between the claim that subjects engage with the world via their unique standpoints or perspectives and the claim that there really is a shared reality with which we are all directly engaged (and about which one can have a better or worse account), because it is those unique standpoints that put us in touch with real states of affairs in the world. In this way, a Merleau-Pontyan perspectival realism can give us a picture of what the perceptual underpinnings of standpoint theory might look like—and why it might be not only an ethical but also an epistemic imperative that we support members of marginalized groups in their efforts to have their voices heard.

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[18] Note that this can include interests and concerns that are particular to intersectional identities; i.e., not all women need have those interests and concerns in order for them to count as specifically gendered *qua* women.

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