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The Situation

An implication of my analysis is that the context one brings to a particular situation, influenced as it is by a multiplicity of past and future experiences, cannot be expressed as easily in the present situation as can a perspective that is more directly tied to a specific set of gestures.¹² Perhaps the reason it is so difficult to make context the explicit focus of a particular situation is because context is precisely what constitutes the situation *qua* situation for me. It is, in fact, because past and future are also implicated in the present situation (in the form of memories, attitudes, and expectations) that there will always be aspects of the situation that are not revealed in the present moment, but that nonetheless help to constitute a horizon of significance that enables me to adopt a particular perspective toward a given experience. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

What needs to be understood is that for the same reason I am present here and now, and present elsewhere and always, and also absent from here and from now, and absent from every place and every time. This ambiguity is not some imperfection of consciousness or existence, but the definition of them. Time in the widest sense, that is, the order of co-existences as well as that of successions, is a setting to which one can gain access and which one can understand *only by occupying a situation in it, and by grasping it in its entirety through the horizons of that situation.* (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 332, my emphasis)

It is through inhabiting a situation that implicates past and future as well as the present that I discover the temporal dimensions of perceptual experience, and, furthermore, it is through attending to the horizons that help to constitute each situation that I learn how to transform my situation and change my perspective. The situation and its horizons are, therefore, always already presupposed in the perceptual process since they serve as the framework for the individual gestures that express my own response to the world. Inhabiting a situation means that I am at once "present and absent" because to be immersed in the situation entails taking up a perspective toward that situation, a perspective that relies on a context of significance that projects beyond the facticity of the experience at hand. Self-knowledge also is directly tied to a given situation, for: "I know myself only in so far as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in my ambiguity" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 345).

And yet, although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the importance of the situation for self-understanding as well as for an understanding of temporality, a problem with his account is that he never clarifies the role that context plays in differentiating one situation (and one perspective) from another.¹³ Instead, Merleau-Ponty focuses more on the notion of a perceptual field than on the way

in which these fields combine to form a unique situation. He discusses how each of the five senses constitutes a field of perceptual activity, but he does not describe sufficiently how these shifting fields bring about continuity in one's perspectives—a continuity that is provided by an ongoing context of significance that helps to determine when one situation has ended and another has begun.

Regarding the function of the perceptual field, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “[w]e now begin to see a deeper meaning in the organization of a field: it is not only colours, but also geometrical forms, all sense-data and the significance of objects which go to form a system. Our perception in its entirety is animated by a logic which assigns to each object its determinate features in virtue of those of the rest, and which ‘cancel out’ as unreal all stray data; it is entirely sustained by the certainty of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 313). Here, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the significance of objects from their color, geometrical form, and sensory properties, and views all of the above as mutually constitutive of a perceptual field. And yet, at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception* one is still left wondering how all of these aspects of the thing relate to one another and to the individual perspectives one continuously takes up toward new situations. If, on the other hand, one takes context to be the ongoing framework that gives each situation its own peculiar focus, as I have been arguing, one can arrive at a better understanding of why each situation is made up of experiences, attitudes, and half-articulated expectations that are not the property of any one person alone. This is because the indeterminacy and ambiguity that are so characteristic of the perceptual process are themselves located *within* a particular context, and make possible the transition from one situation to another without requiring a corresponding change in one's physical orientation.

Within any given situation, Merleau-Ponty suggests, past, present, and future tend to be incorporated in a fluid totality that achieves its primary determinacy through the immediacy of a spatially-oriented, figure-ground structure. This latter structure, in fact, continually “fills in” the indeterminacy of the situation in the fullness of the present moment, and the perspective that results out of this experience (and, more precisely, out of the individual gestures out of which it is composed), in turn becomes part of the context for one's future experiences. However, by failing to distinguish the contribution of a more general context of significance from the immediate physical “presentness” of the situation as it is revealed through the relationship between figure and ground, Merleau-Ponty remains unable to account for why it is that when I recall an earlier social encounter when conversing with a friend, I so frequently begin by recreating the broader interpersonal context that situated the experience, often de-emphasizing the actual spatial setting of the encounter itself (unless there was something unique about this latter that I feel must be conveyed). Moreover, if the context was simply the immediate perceptual horizon or background for a

specific experience, it is not clear why, when recounting the incident, I would emphasize the social setting in which a particular encounter unfolded as an indispensable backdrop for understanding the actual content of the discourse. Here, what is deemed especially important is recreating the less visible, contextual features of the situation that gave rise to a particular conversation so that my friend, too, will understand why I acted the way I did at that point in time.

That is to say, I look to the context to help supply the *reasons* for my action, and this context, when viewed from a later perspective, incorporates my own responses to others as well as the responses of other people to me.

The importance of context for understanding everyday experiences extends not just to situations that have already taken place, but also to situations that one anticipates will take place in the future. Thus, if I expect a certain letter to arrive by next Tuesday, I concentrate not only on what the letter might or might not say, but also on the attitude and expectations of the person sending the letter, as well on my own possible attitude and response to having received it. While it is certainly the case that these attitudes and expectations form a horizon for the interpretation of the letter when it actually does arrive, they are not rooted in the present situation in the way that the color of the notepaper, the handwriting, and the scent of the paper are. Instead, these attitudes and expectations together form part of the basic context out of which a specific perspective toward the letter develops, and the figure-ground structure, by contrast, refers to the way in which the meanings of the written words themselves form a pattern against the background of the written letter as a whole.¹⁴

A good example of how perspectives are influenced by the more general context within which action takes place has to do with the way I view drivers when I am a pedestrian and the way I view pedestrians when I am driving. Both pedestrians and drivers have places to go, and each views the other as an occasional obstacle in arriving at a final destination. When I am driving, I resent the sudden appearance of a pedestrian cutting across the street in front of me *even though* I myself always cut across the same street whenever I see an opening in the stream of traffic. I silently curse the smug street-crosser and am angered when he or she causes me to miss my timing on the next light. When I, as a pedestrian, am waiting to cross the street, however, and a car speeds up to prevent me from crossing in time to avoid a whole onslaught of vehicles arriving from the previous light, I am furious at the driver's impatience and can become quite haughty about the respect due me as a pedestrian. After all, I am simply a fragile human being, without the protection of a honking mechanical monster at my disposal to make others jump to do my bidding. The second I step into a car, however, the situation changes, and I am the one angrily wondering what the hell those people are doing calmly crossing, crossing, crossing the street long after my light has turned green and they no longer have the right of way.