

Delusional Mood and Delusional Perception – A Phenomenological Analysis

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Key Words

Schizophrenia · Delusional mood · Delusional perception · Embodiment · Intersubjectivity

Abstract

In the initial stages of schizophrenia, the environment as perceived by the patient changes into a puzzling, mysterious and stage-like scenery. At the same time, objects or persons may gain an overwhelming physiognomic expression and may even fuse with the patient's body. The paper explains these different alterations using Husserl's concept of intentional perception on the one hand, and Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception on the other hand. The first may also be understood as describing the intersubjective constitution of reality through common concepts which structure intentional perception. The latter points to the embodiment of the perceiving subject and uncovers our intimate connection with the world mediated by the lived body. Thus, in each perception, an active, intentional or 'gnostic' component and a bodily, 'pathic' component work together. On this basis, the alteration of schizophrenic perception in delusional mood may be described as a paralysis of intentionality, or of the 'gnostic' component of perception. The synthetic and sense-bestowing processes effective in perception are seriously disturbed. On the other hand,

as a result of the disturbance of intentional perception, physiognomic and expressive properties are set free within the perceptual field. The 'pathic' component of perception becomes independent. Thus, the intersubjective constitution of reality is replaced by idiosyncratic meanings and qualities of perception, leading finally into delusional perception.

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Introduction

The early stages of schizophrenia have always attracted the attention of psychopathologists as well as philosophers. They offer the possibility to understand the normal constitution of the world by studying the failure and fragmentation of this constitution. However, the experiences of schizophrenic patients are not easy to interpret, all the more so, as nearly all mental processes may be affected and disturbed. The following analysis is restricted to a phenomenological interpretation of the altered perception in acute schizophrenia, drawing mainly on Husserl's [9, 10] and Merleau-Ponty's [14] concepts of perception.

There are two salient phenomena in schizophrenic perception that may seem contradictory at first sight. To begin with, the overall atmosphere experienced in the ini-

tial stages of schizophrenia is characterized by a radical alienation of the perceived environment, usually referred to as perplexity or 'delusional mood'. Patients often describe their experience like this:

'Wherever you are looking, everything looks unreal.' – 'People went down the street like in a puppet theatre' [6].

'People look confusing... they are almost like they're made up... People that I know... have masks on or they're disguising themselves. It's like a big play... like a big production story' [4].

'When you go somewhere, everything seems already set up for you like in a theatre – it's really eerie, and you get terribly frightened' (a patient of the author).

Thus, the environment obtains a strange, artificial and puzzling character. It seems arranged like a stage setting and things give the impression of being only covers or imitations for an undeterminable purpose. But in the midst of this overall estrangement, a second change occurs: single objects gain a new, mysterious and bewildering expression or meaning. The sight of a limping man on the street may suddenly evoke the impression of the devil hunting the patient. The stroke of a bell may announce his imminent death. The term of 'delusional perception' coined by Kurt Schneider [18] refers to a strange, idiosyncratic and self-referential meaning given to apparently indifferent things or situations, without comprehensible reason. Since the perceived objects are not obviously altered, Schneider considered delusional perception to be a disorder of thought, not of perception. However, Matussek [13] has shown that the idiosyncratic, self-referential meanings derive from the emergence of normally inconspicuous 'physiognomic' or 'essential' properties of objects in the perceptual field. The limping man gains a devilish appearance, since limping is an attribute of the devil. Thus, the delusional meaning is already inherent in the perception itself.

However, the objects may not only gain an overwhelming expression, but also lose their distance and even fuse with the perceiving subject or with his body. A schizophrenic patient of mine, watching the cars on the street, suddenly felt 'something metallic' of the coachwork leap at him and merge with him. He felt 'kind of hard, sharp and cold', like the car itself and its contours. Another patient felt an 'energetic potential' passing over from other persons to his body and entering through his forehead, especially when he was being looked at. He then had to walk for some time to let this tension flow off to the ground again.

How are we to understand these two fundamental changes in perception – the first alienating the environment to a theatre scenery or façade, the second uncovering hidden appeals and obtrusive properties of the objects so that they do not keep their distance any more? In order to explain these distortions, we have to analyse normal perception in phenomenological terms, using Husserl's [9, 10] concept of intentional perception on the one hand, and Merleau-Ponty's [14] concept of embodied perception on the other hand.

A Husserlian Account of Perception

First I will give a short account of Husserl's theory of perception as drawn up mainly in his 'ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology' [9, 10]. For Husserl, perception is one of the main paradigms for the intentionality of consciousness. As Rojcewicz and Lutgens [16] have pointed out, his analysis starts from a paradox: perception is perspectival spatially as well as temporally; it is bound to only one vantage point at one time. Nevertheless, what is seen from this perspective is indeed a three-dimensional physical thing, not only one single aspect or one 'view' of a thing. Perception is limited to one immanent perspective and yet transcends this perspective to open out to the *thing itself*. How is this possible?

Perception, Husserl answers, overcomes its own perspectivity by *intending* the object through its aspects. The perceived object is not passively received into consciousness, but is constituted by the 'noetic' act of conscious perception. In each perceptive act, multiple intentional processes are combined together, in a way that Husserl calls 'passive synthesis'. For example, as I look at a table, only its visible sides are directly given to me. On the basis of this aspect, however, other aspects of the object (e.g. its invisible sides) are synthetically co-intended or 'appresented'. The actual aspect thus includes and reflects the totality of possible aspects making up the unity of the full object.

A second, temporal form of synthesis is the *identification* of an intentional object as precisely one and the same through its different perceptions. In seeing the table in front of me, my sequence of perceiving acts all 'mean' and intend the table as 'it itself', as identically the same, real table. Third, it is also the synthetic intentionality of perception that bestows *sense* to the perceived and constitutes the object as a meaningful unity. According to Husserl, perception contains an ideal component, the 'noematic sense'. The general concept or the 'idea' of the table

is not just added to the seen object but is itself perceived. We do not see something coloured in such and such configuration which we then interpret as a table, but we see the table itself from the beginning. Moreover, not single objects are added together, but *the whole situation* is perceived immediately, e.g. this is a table set for the meal. The meaningful unity of the situation is the primary given, and only afterwards may we isolate single sensory moments out of it. Thus, in perceiving, we are simultaneously aware of the meaning of the perceived, and in the last analysis, this meaning is always embedded in the *familiar context* of the world as a whole, i.e. the table is to sit at, the meal is prepared for me, I come in time for supper, and so forth. Intentional perception constitutes meaningful unities in a world that has always been familiar and meaningful to us as a whole.

Let us summarize: perception according to Husserl is not a passive event, but an intentional act, meaning it actively aims at things themselves. It is by intending and ‘meaning’ the object through its different appearances that perception gives us the object as such, as real, and not merely as a picture or appearance. Without the continuous unifying and sense-bestowing acts effective in perception our normal perceptual belief in the actuality of the world (the ‘natural attitude’ or the *Urdoxa*) would be shattered and we would no longer have a world at all.

Merleau-Ponty’s Analysis of Embodied Perception

Merleau-Ponty’s [14] account of perception differs from Husserl’s in some way. For him, the subject of perception is not a transcendental and disengaged consciousness, but an embodied being, situated through the lived body (*corps vivant*) in space and time. This embodiment of the subject is not separable from, but an integral part of perception. At the same time as I look at the table, the floor beneath my feet, the posture of my body, the silence of the room are present at the margins of my consciousness. The objects are perceived by me in ‘embodied presence’, *leibhaftig*, and not as images or *eidola*, because they form a common field with my body and are in principle accessible to me.

However, the lived body does not merely stay in the background, it imbues perception as a whole. The body is ‘an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest, which reverberates to all the sounds, vibrates to all colours’ [14; pp 273/236]. This is shown by synaesthetic sensation, by the emotional tinge in every perception and by the subtle

‘sympathetic’ feelings by which the body takes part in the dynamics and motions of the perceptual field. We can empathically *feel* objects moving up and down, fastening or slowing down, their ‘crescendo’ or ‘decrescendo’. Things are perceived by the body through an assimilation or *mimesis*, and in handling them, it also appropriates and *incorporates* them. By becoming its ‘extensions’, they participate in its familiarity for us and do not remain mere objects. In Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, then, the field of perception is constituted by the living, feeling and moving body which ‘uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world’ [14; pp 273/237]. The world consists, as it were, of the material of the body; it is ‘flesh from its flesh’, and only thus becomes accessible for us.

Intentional perception as conceived by Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology therefore presupposes still another, preconscious or tacit layer of experience, namely a hidden texture of similarities that connects the body with the world. Beneath the intentionality of conscious perception, the lived body is directed to the things by its own ‘intentional arc’. Its prereflective performance is prior to any subject-object distinction. For example, when I am engaged in a conversation while driving a car, it is the lived body that registers the red traffic light and makes me put on the brakes without even being aware of it. In the last analysis, sensation on this preconscious level is anonymous, and therefore ‘I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive’ [14; pp 249/215].

We may now take Merleau-Ponty’s and Husserl’s concepts together, regarding them as complementary rather than opposed. Perception then implies both bodily sensation, i.e. active intentionality, and the grasping of the form and concept, i.e. conscious intentionality. The first contains a primordial, vital or bodily meaning, the second a conceptual, general and intersubjective significance. It was Erwin Straus [20; p 151] who aptly distinguished a ‘pathic’ and a ‘gnostic’ component in perception, the first being equal to bodily *sensation*, the second to perception in the full sense, or *apperception*. This polarity is expressed by Merleau-Ponty as well:

‘I open my eyes on to my table, and my consciousness is swallowed by colours and confused reflexions; it is hardly distinguishable from what is offered to it; it spreads out, through its accompanying body, into the spectacle which so far is not a spectacle of anything. Suddenly, I start to focus my eyes on the table... I begin to look at a distance... I can thus re-assign to its place in the world the something which was impinging upon me,... and direct myself towards the determinate object’ [14; pp 276/239].

By focusing on the object instead of passively staring I grasp it by my gaze *as* object and determine its significance. Pathic sensation is a contact, even a fusion of the body and the world; in contrast, gnostic perception gives us the object *as* object, in a distance from our body. In normal perception, the two components cannot be separated. The table is sensed or felt by the body; but it is only perceived *as* table when it can be named as well, i.e. when perception grasps its general significance which we have once learnt from others: full perception is always a recognition. Let us now see how perception alters when it does not recognize the things any more.

Delusional Mood in Schizophrenia

As we have seen at the beginning, the schizophrenic patient experiences a fundamental alienation of reality in its entirety. Using Husserl's analysis of perception at first, we can now explain this fundamental change by a *weakening and destruction of the intentionality or the 'gnostic component' effective in normal perception*. As has been pointed out by Wiggins et al. [21], the synthetic processes (or 'passive syntheses', according to Husserl) which constitute unified and identical objects are seriously disturbed in beginning schizophrenia¹. Perception normally aims at the object through its different aspects and 'means' the thing itself; now it is only capable of giving an aspect of it, an 'image' or 'surface', which the patient experiences as an unreal appearance or a staging. Things lack the normal fullness and concreteness. I shall give another example:

'All seemed ever more unreal to me, like a foreign country... Then it occurred to me that this was not my former environment any more. Somebody could have set this up for me as a scenery. Or else someone could be projecting a television show for me... Then I felt the walls and checked if there was really a surface' [11; p 69].

Instead of actively grasping and constituting the objects, schizophrenic perception in delusional mood pre-

sents only imitations or envelopes of things. The schizophrenic patient, as it were, watches his own perceptions from outside rather than living in them; he '*experiences his experiencing*' [15; p 125]. Thus, he does not recognize in the active sense, but is surrounded by puzzling images which, like the dream images for the dreamer, all seem to aim at him. He literally becomes the visitor of a theatre performance or a film projection put on by his senses without knowing what kind of play is going on.

Moreover, with the disintegration of intentional perception, the patient loses the *familiar meaning* of the perceived situations: he does not know any more 'what it's all about', why the things he encounters are here at all, and what to do with them. To be sure, the patient is still able to identify and name the things. However, we have to be aware here of the more basic sense of the word 'meaning' as opposed to 'significance'. *Significances* are intersubjectively and historically generated, encoded in language and concepts, and acquired by socialization. *Meanings* realize these common significances here and now: things matter for me. This pencil is not only a pencil as such, but something *I* can write with; this chair is something *I* can sit on. Normally, these are 'matters of course', part of the common-sense understanding of everyday life [19]. For the schizophrenic person, however, things have lost this familiarity. With the subject being detached and alienated from his own perceiving, the significances remain abstract and arbitrary. They may be known to him as before, but they have stopped to *mean* anything to him. The constitution of the everyday world is thus fundamentally disturbed.

As a result, the things and situations do not present simply 'themselves' any more, but an abundance of possible meanings, or a *puzzle*. Their apparent character becomes highly ambiguous; they only *pretend* to be just themselves. Objects normally perceived as parts of a situation may seem strangely isolated, disconnected from each other and detached from their encompassing context. A table set for the meal is not just meant to sit down and take dinner. This soup tureen on the table only feigns to be just a soup tureen by its appearance. Why is it here at all? Who knows what terrible contents it will reveal? The unity of the situation is split into pieces; thus, it conveys the impression that it is put together artificially, and this arrangement actually means something else. Even the entire flat might be an ingeniously constructed scenery suggesting to be the patient's home while he has actually been kidnapped and carried off somewhere else.

The schizophrenic patient in delusional mood may be compared to someone who has suddenly been transferred

¹ The question of how this disturbance of intentional perception may be described on the cognitive and neurobiological level cannot be pursued here. Correlates may be found in disturbances of selective attention, i.e. the capacity to select target information from a broader stimulus field for further processing, as well as in an insufficient use of familiar categorizations for classifying sensory input (pigeon-holing defect), resulting in disrupted automatic processing and in a disinhibition of irrelevant stimuli. Current theories range from early precognitive gating failures to deficits of executive control in selectively sorting between relevant and irrelevant information. For references, see e.g. Hemsley [7, 8], Emrich [3], Green [5], and Mathalon et al. [12].

to a foreign country without noticing it, and who does not understand the language of its inhabitants. He will desperately try to guess the puzzling significances of their gibberish and gestures that *all seem to aim at him* because he cannot decipher and thus 'neutralize' them. Not being able to relate the significances to the common intersubjective world, he is caught in *self-referential* meanings. In the same way, the loss of the sense bestowed to the surroundings by intentional perception cannot leave 'neutral' things behind. When perception does not actively intend or 'mean' the objects any more, then these objects, deprived of their common-sense significance and familiar context, must conversely 'mean' the perceiver himself. There must be a meaning or intention hidden behind them and directed towards the patient who thus becomes 'the passive center of the world' [2; p 77].

The alteration of perception results in what may be described as an *inversion of intentionality*: instead of intending the objects, the patient 'is intended' by them. Every sight presents only an imitation, a mask or a scenery that conceals an inscrutable intention. All appearances are produced by a hidden subjectivity, an alien intentionality beyond reach, only revealing itself in deception and simulation (and therefore often interpreted by the patient as an anonymous organisation or a secret service). The patient is 'meant' by gazes from the background, spied at from out of anonymous cars or secretly tested in well-prepared situations. The delusions arising out of delusional mood only carry this basic experience further by personalizing the anonymous intentionality, by searching for hints that unmask the 'wire pullers', or for cues on how to act in a totally enigmatic situation.

The Fusion of Body and Environment

Let us summarize our analysis so far. In the initial stages of schizophrenia, the constitution of meaningful perception is profoundly disturbed. Its synthetic, identifying and sense-bestowing processes are weakened or distorted. What can normally be taken for granted, the familiarity of the world, has vanished [1], and the patient loses his basic orientation in the environment. Perception, instead of actively intending the objects by its noetic acts, turns into a passive reception of *images*. Thus, it does not overcome its own perspectivity any more: the patient is transferred into an ego-centric world. Every sight seems to point back at him, offering a mystery that he has to decipher.

However, with this paralysis of intentionality in delusional mood, the second major change in schizophrenic perception arises, i.e. delusional perception. Overwhelming physiognomic expressions and new, idiosyncratic meanings emerge in the perceptual field, experienced with an irresistible authority, like a 'revelation' (*apophany*, [2; p 46]). Moreover, perceived objects may even fuse with the subject. The breakdown of the intentional, active or 'gnostic' component of perception releases an archaic communication of the lived body with its environment. It belongs precisely to the sympathetic 'primary layer of sense experience' [14; pp 262/227] which Merleau-Ponty discovered under Husserl's intentionality of conscious perception. Here the subject-object distinction gets blurred, as Merleau-Ponty described in the case of seeing:

'According as I fix my eyes on an object... or else wholly submit myself to the event, the same colour appears to me as superficial..., or else it becomes an atmospheric colour... Or I may feel it in my eye as a vibration of my gaze; or finally it may pass on to my body a similar manner of being' [14; pp 263/227].

In the 'primary layer' of sensation, colours or sounds 'are received into my body' synaesthetically. Thus, 'every perception is a communication or communion', 'a coition... of our body with things' [14; pp 370/320].

In schizophrenia, this 'communion' may become independent: *the pathic component of perception is uncoupled from the gnostic component*. Having lost their objective and conceptual unity, things may gain an overwhelming wealth of expressions, charged with emotional qualities. Especially the gaze of others, the quintessence of expression, obtains a captivating and piercing power. Single aspects or details of the perceptual field, not framed and kept in distance by noetic intention any more, may become prominent, leap at the perceiving subject, catch him or penetrate into him. Instead of the common and intersubjective significance of things or situations, e.g. 'this is a table set for the meal', there arise idiosyncratic or archetypal fragments of meaning, always alluding to the patient and his body. The smell of the soup on the table may suddenly take him back to his childhood or to another country; the white colour of the tureen may signify his purity and innocence. But the meal could also be prepared to celebrate a mass in which he shall be sacrificed; the screwed legs of the table indicate that he shall be tortured. In this way, the mimetic faculty of the lived body creates idiosyncratic meanings that seem unmotivated (incomprehensible or *unverständlich* according to Kurt Schneider [18]) only because

they are far away from the common-sense significances of everyday life.

With increasing weakness of the intentional, objectifying perception, the ecstatic potential of the lived body awakes. Turned inside out, as it were, it may change into a single sensual surface that fuses with the environment. Merleau-Ponty himself describes such a case: a schizophrenic patient feels that a brush placed at the window is suddenly coming nearer and entering his head, though he still sees it lying there. The visible brush, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is merely an envelope or a phantom: the true brush, the stiff, prickly entity which is incarnated in this appearance, is concentrated in the gaze; it has moved from the window, leaving there only its lifeless shell' [14; pp 336/290 ff]. Before the sane man the objects remain, 'keeping their distance', whereas such hallucinations arise by 'a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world' [14]. In order to comprehend the meaning of schizophrenic space, we have to resuscitate 'in ourselves, in our present perception, the relationship of the subject and his world which analytical reflexion does away with' [14].

What Merleau-Ponty is describing here is precisely the uncoupling of the gnostic and the pathic component of perception. The expressive power of the brush may become independent just because intentional perception has lost its dominance. It has left behind an 'envelope', whereas the 'true brush' is set free. The pathic or mimetic component has lost its balance and restriction by the intentional, gnostic component, and so things cannot be kept at a distance any more. Normally, the emergence of highly idiosyncratic and obtrusive meanings is inhibited by the general concepts inherent in intentional perception. It is by the loss of this intersubjective significance, by remaining in its perspectival aspect as a mere correlate of the body, that the perceived gains its overwhelming expressiveness. In the last analysis, this corresponds to a break-in of dream consciousness with its dominance of expression and physiognomy into waking consciousness.

However, it is not analytical reflexion that normally lets the primordial power of expression fade, as Merleau-Ponty states, but the intentionality of conscious perception itself already puts the objects at a distance. Merleau-Ponty believes that we regain the primary layer of sensation if 'we really coincide with the act of perception and break with the critical attitude' or 'analytical reflexion' [14; pp 276/238 ff]. However, true perception has taken up this objectifying attitude in itself, for this process is part of the 'aesthetic education of man', as Schiller put it:

'Man is superior to every horror of nature as soon as he knows to give form to it and to change it into an object' [17; p 395]. Thus, it is not the 'true brush' that the patient feels with his own body, as Merleau-Ponty believes; for the real brush shows itself as such *by resisting* and *withdrawing from* him, instead of plunging into him. True perception consists both in mimetic assimilation by the lived body *and* objectifying, noetic recognition. It is a unity of participation and alienation.

Conclusion

In delusional mood, the environment as perceived by the patient changes into a puzzling, mysterious and stage-like scenery. At the same time, in delusional perception, the objects (things, persons, situations) gain an overwhelming physiognomic expression and may even fuse with the patient's body. I have interpreted these alterations using Husserl's concept of intentional perception on the one hand, and Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception on the other hand. The first tells us how perception overcomes its own perspectivity; the latter, in a sense, reaffirms this perspectivity by pointing to the embodiment of the perceiving subject as the foundation for every perception. The first may also be understood as describing the intersubjective constitution of reality through common concepts which structure intentional perception: we see a table because we can name it a table as well. The latter, however, uncovers our intimate connection with the world mediated by the lived body. Thus, in each perception, an active, intentional or 'gnostic' component and a 'pathic', bodily component work together. However, these two components are also antagonistic: the active component, by intending the object as such, tends to drive back the pathic component, i.e. the expressive or sensual qualities to which the body is susceptible.

With the weakening of intentional perception in schizophrenia, objects and situations are not perceived as such any more, but as mere images or enigmatic sceneries. They lose their common-sense significance and turn into a ubiquitous puzzle. Strictly speaking, the significances may still be known in an abstract way, but they have stopped to mean anything to the patient. He is not able to relate them to a common intersubjective world any more. Instead, the situations are perceived as self-referential, resulting finally in delusional perceptions. To put it in Straus' terms: the gnostic component of perception is uncoupled from its pathic or bodily component. This in turn releases new, idiosyncratic meanings and

disinhibits the ecstatic potential of the lived body which may even fuse with the environment. This fusion is mediated by physiognomic and expressive properties set free by the splintering of coherent objects and their common-sense significances. Thus, the intersubjective constitution

of reality is replaced by idiosyncratic meanings. The *koinós kósmos*, the common world, gives way to the *idios kósmos*, the ego-centric and self-referential world of acute psychosis.

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