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Antony Fredriksson

The Alien World, Attention and the Habitual¹

[Untertitel]

Abstract

This article examines the role of attention in encounters with the unknown. By examining this process of the unknown becoming known through a reading of some seminal works, notably by Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Waldenfels, the article focuses on the existentially significant characteristics of the function of attention that are disclosed by the encounter with an alien environment. Thereby, attention is considered as being neither fully under the control of the subject, nor completely the result of the external conditioning of our sense perception. Rather, attention will be seen to reside within a reciprocal field of tension between the familiar and the alien. This is related to Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'intentional arch', describing the process of transition from the indeterminate to the determinate. Endorsing this account of attention will allow us to understand the limits of approaches to enacted and embodied cognition that still understand the process of getting to know something new, and even something alien, as a form of 'domestication'.

And when I arrived there for the first time, the first streets that I saw upon leaving the train station were – like the first words of a stranger – only manifestations of a still ambiguous, though already incomparable essence. ■ ■²

What happens when the unknown becomes known? For example, what happens when I move to a new city and walk around in a part of town that is completely unknown to me – what happens between that moment and a situation later on when that same place is no longer alien to me, when I have gotten to know it, or when walking through the streets has become habitual? In this article, I will examine the role of attention in such encounters with the unknown. I

¹ The work on this article was done during my stay at the Center for Subjectivity Research at The University of Copenhagen, as well as at the Department of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. I wish to thank my colleagues at both institutions for comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. I am especially grateful to PhD. Felipe León who made a thorough reading, for his extensively helpful comments. I also wish to thank the Åbo Akademi University Foundation for funding this research.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York 2012, 294.

claim that encounters with an alien environment reveal some existentially significant characteristics of how our attention works.

By examining this process of the unknown becoming known through a reading of some seminal works, mainly in the phenomenological tradition, I want to give an account of attention as a faculty that aids us in facing the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the alien.³ This will entail an articulation of the unique role of the perceptual action of attention.

To be acquainted with something does not necessarily mean that one understands that something. When something has become habitual, it is not necessarily pertinently present for me, whereas something that is new or alien to me draws my attention to it. There are semantic layers in our common concept of ‘knowledge’; it is not a purely epistemological term. As an umbrella-term, “knowledge” also refers to our existential relations to the world. I suggest that an investigation of these ambiguities, the hardly distinguishable differences and similarities between the concepts of ‘acquaintance’, ‘understanding’, ‘presence’ and ‘habit’, enable us to see connections between purely epistemological questions, and existential and moral ones. In what follows, I will examine some aspects of this general view of understanding, by discussing the relation between attention and the habitual. In order to point out the dynamics involved here, I will address these ambiguities in three steps.

Firstly, I will show how attentive perception stands in contrast to our habitual ways of perceiving, and how this function of breaking in on the habitual grants us the possibility of revising our relation to our environment.

Secondly, I will argue that epistemology has to be able to account for how we acquire new experiences. According to a deeply rooted prejudice within philosophy, the process of getting to know the unknown is simply a process of more and more refined actions that ‘domesticate’ the unknown and thus make it known. I claim that this process of domestication is only one part of a more intricate story.

³ In what follows, I will treat *attention as a faculty*. By this, I refer to a common use of language, in which, we can be asked to be attentive, and criticized for our lack of attention. When we acknowledge that we can be more or less present in a situation, this also entails that we can succeed or fail in being present in a certain situation. Thus, attention depends, to a certain extent, on our ability. But, contrary to intentional acts, in which success and failure are ascribed to the subjects’ competent agency, attention involves a less clear definition of agency. This amounts to yet another ambiguity. In attending, we undergo, we are vigilant, engaged, present; we expose ourselves. In this sense, these acts build on a refraining from, if not agency altogether, a certain domesticating form of agency. I will return to this ambiguity in my discussion on domestication. Cf., Tim Ingold: *To Human Is a Verb*. In: Kevin Cahill, Martin Gustafsson and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer (eds.): *Finite but Unbounded: New Approaches in Philosophical Anthropology*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2017, 14 ff.

Thirdly, I will articulate how attention is a faculty that requires a refraining from projecting our pre-conceptions on the world. When we are faced with the alien, we can understand the unknown, sometimes perhaps more sincerely, if we simply attend to it instead of domesticating, rationalizing, and projecting.

My starting point is the claim that epistemology has to take into account the relationship between two modalities of perceiving: the one of the rational knowledgeable observer, and the one of the unknowing beginner. This kind of tension is the point of departure of Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published book *The Visible and the Invisible*. He writes:

This is the way things are and nobody can do anything about it. It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see* and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it.⁴

In this sense, on the one hand, the perceptual world does not present itself to us without friction. It does not appear to the perceiver as readily deciphered. On the other hand, from the beginner's perspective, the visible world is still understandable. Even in cases when we are faced with a new or alien visual world, what appears is never completely foreign to us. Understanding is involved in both the perspective of the beginner, and the perspective of the rational knowledgeable observer, but they are to some extent different kinds of understanding.

Bernhard Waldenfels notes that the root of the word 'attention' is the Latin *tensio*, for 'tension'. In Augustinian theological philosophy, this concept signifies the play of forces between the soul and body. This means that attention is neither reducible to the subjective, nor to the objective; it rather resides in the tension between them.⁵ Although the Augustinian tension between soul and body might seem outdated, there is still something worth holding on to in this characterization of the faculty of attention as a kind of go-between. I can, for example, look for a pair of scissors that are in front of my eyes. My failure in such a case is not a purely perceptual failure, it is a failure of attending to the scissors that are within my visual field. To attend to something requires something more than the right causal, spatial, and optical circumstances. There is a form of presence in perception that is not reducible to a causal or spatial matter. To be present or attentive means that one is engaged with the world, and to be engaged is characterized by being able to go beyond repeating one's habitual ways of perceiving. In this case, the opposite of our 'habits' of seeing, is not yet another metaphysical reality, but our way of seeing beyond, or in spite of, the habitual. It is not another non-visual world, or a different visual world. Beyond

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston 1968, 4.

⁵ Bernhard Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*. Evanston 2011, 59.

the habitual are events in which we are attuned to the present historical world – to our perception – rather than to our preconceptions.

1. *Attention as presence*

Our knowledge begins from a state of not knowing, of facing something that is alien and perhaps puzzling to us; in this sense, knowledge is achieved by a process that starts with us facing something that is not known to us, but that somehow awakens our interest, or our attention. Waldenfels articulates this as follows: “Perceiving does not start with an act of observation; on the contrary, it arises with an event of attention that is aroused and provoked by what strikes me.”⁶ In this sense, attention is primarily something that *happens* to us, it is not set into play by our conscious ‘knowing’ or ‘willing’, and is therefore not like the act of observing.⁷

Wittgenstein writes about a similar discrepancy: “Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as ‘Imagine *this!*’; and also ‘Now see the figure like *this!*’; but not: ‘Now see this leaf green!’.”⁸ The distinction here refers to two modes of perception. The first mode builds on the intentional aspect of seeing that is subject to our will (‘see it *like* this’). The second mode is related to the perspective of attention that Waldenfels articulates. To see the color of the leaf requires that we attend to what is there in our perception, it is an act of looking at the object, rather than an act of thinking or imagining.⁹ The mode of perception, which in this sense can work beyond our will, brings to the fore the limits of our control. The visual world, never mind how much we think, conceptualize or imagine, will not change color (‘the leaf *is* green’). In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, vision is in this sense a gift of nature that does not require any willful effort from the perceiver.¹⁰

In order to flesh out this distinction, let us start with an everyday example. I can recall experiences when I am highly present and highly attentive, and usually these experiences consist of situations in which I am forced to deal with something that is unknown to me. I often reflect on occasions in which I try to find my orientation in a new environment. For example, while writing this article I have just moved to Copenhagen, a city not that familiar to me, and the process of getting to know this city is a constant challenge of acquainting myself with

⁶ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 45.

⁷ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 47.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: 2009, §256: 224.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford 2008, 4.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 224.

new areas. I can recall a Saturday walk down Nørrebrogade during the first week of my stay here, feeling very vivid, looking at people, looking at shops, looking at the street-junctions and the names of the streets on placards, sensing the weather, the colors of the houses and the sky, paying notice to the chaotic bike-lane and other Saturday-strollers. It is a feeling of letting my thinking and my reflection rest, since the world around me feels novel and worth paying attention to, and for a brief moment I am able to get past my habitual ways of seeing. The part that puzzles me with this process is how I could articulate what happens when the unknown becomes known – what happens when I move around in a part of town that is completely unknown to me, what happens between that instance and a situation later on, when that same place is no longer alien to me? In this context, the concept of knowledge has a significance that reaches beyond merely epistemological questions. To get to know a new environment is also an existential venture.

When I orientate myself in a neighborhood that is new to me, on this journey I attend to the urban landscape actively. I cannot depend solely on memory or habit, since the markers in my earlier experience do not necessarily apply to the new environment, or at least I am aware of the possibility that they might not apply. On such a walk, the stroll down an unknown street will usually be a much more vivid and elusive experience than the next walk down that same street when my habit again has gained a stronger foothold. The uncertainty involved in such a situation might provoke quite different emotional attitudes in me. It might become a trip that sparks my wonder and curiosity; moreover, the uncertainty might also lead to stress, anxiety and uneasiness. This is to say that there is a dynamic at play here that does not add up to a specific unified emotion. The uncertainty that encounters with an alien environment entail, opens up a field of possibilities for different emotional affects and reactions. The alien can provoke discomfort as well as a sense of adventure and opportunity precisely because it breaks with my habitual ways of seeing an environment. This is related to what Matthew Ratcliffe calls ‘existential feeling’, which, in a negative sense, is characterized as a “feeling of contingency, uncertainty, insecurity, homelessness”.¹¹ But, in Thomas Fuchs’ terms, it is also related to curiosity towards the world as providing the subject with an “enticing counterworld” and “opportunity for transgressing borders”.¹² What is common to these positive and negati-

¹¹ Matthew Ratcliffe: *The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling*. In: Joerg Fingerhut and Sabine Marienberg (eds.): *Feelings of Being Alive*. Göttingen 2012, 4.

¹² Thomas Fuchs: *The Alien and the Self*. In: Bernhard Leistle (ed.): *Anthropology and Alterity. Responding to the Other*. New York 2017, 149.

ve existential events and feelings is that they relate to a situation in which the perceptual world is seen in a new light.¹³

Returning to the discussion of the habitual and its relation to the alien, there is a dialectic at play here. In a situation in which we realize that our life has become too repetitive and that we have become too set in our ways of seeing, the disruption, provided by the encounter with the alien, can be a relief. In the counter example in which the alien appears to be a threat to the familiar habitual world the disruption feels instead constricting.

The first commute to the unknown place in a foreign environment is usually felt to take more time than the trip back, and this phenomenon is related to the uncertainty involved in facing something for the first time. As Waldenfels expresses it: “Attention opens a new chapter in the book of time. Attention has a different temporality (displacement of time). Normally, being here and now we are elsewhere too. The exception is when we are surprised.”¹⁴ When surprised, we experience something that we know we have not put into play intentionally. A surprise is something that pulls our attention out and thwarts our habitual paths of perceiving. This kind of experience can be described as a way of revitalizing our consciousness, an experience of becoming more present. This presence requires a more concentrated effort in our acts of perception.

The role of attention is crucial in moments of surprise, and its specific feature is, according to Waldenfels, that it resides on the threshold between the known and the unknown, control/beyond control. Waldenfels writes: “it is intrinsic for attention that the senses can be controlled only to a limited extent. If the controls were perfect, life would be determined only by habit without allowing for anything of the alien.”¹⁵ The important point here is the way Waldenfels delineates the dynamics of attention. Attention is neither fully under the control of the subject, nor is it completely the result of sense perception’s external conditioning; it can only reside within a reciprocal field of tension between the familiar and the alien.

In the example in which I try to orient myself in a new unknown part of the city, the dynamics of attention is at work as my habitual way of seeing is called into question by the new environment. Here, any attempt to dissociate all of my earlier memories and my judgment would not help. I cannot rely solely on these cognitive functions, I also have to attend to what is actually present in my visual field, to what is going on in the present. The ‘presence’ at play here is related to

¹³ Ratcliffe: *The Phenomenology of Existential Feeling*, 13.

¹⁴ Bernhard Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of Attention*. Public lecture at European Humanities Universities 16. 8. 2013:
URL = <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRO_3C7MBws&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁵ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 58.

my attentive engagement with my environment. Presence does not solely refer to spatial and temporal relations; it also includes a certain character of my action. When I am present, I am in the process of *establishing a fresh relationship between me and my environment*. Sara Ahmed writes: “what is ‘present’ or near to us is not causal: we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there.”¹⁶ In my example, the dynamics have to do with a relation between the habitual and the alien, and Ahmed points out that these should not be confused with spatial relationships; she writes: “we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already in reach.”¹⁷ In this way, the spatial relation between me and an objective place is one issue, whereas the existential relation to that place – its familiarity/unfamiliarity – is another.

When we acknowledge that to be a rational knowledgeable observer is something that we take for granted, and understand that this way of being is different from the occasions in which we are awake to what is happening, we also grasp in what sense the alien is a foundational part of the processes of knowledge. Ahmed writes:

In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation. When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think ‘to think’ about this point. When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.¹⁸

And later: “being lost is a way of inhabiting a space by registering what is not familiar”.¹⁹ Disorientation reminds us of the structure and familiarity that the habitual offers.

To have an orientation also requires that the subject has a direction or a goal for his/her actions. Rationality and acting rationally are entwined with goal-oriented actions. Rationality works well for us when we aim at a certain goal, then we can pick apart the tasks required to reach that goal through axiomatic thinking. However, rationality can also stand in the way of our discoveries of the world. Attentive perception can be said to be a phenomenologically different mode of awareness compared to axiomatic thinking. To be present in one’s own perception requires the ability to adhere to what is there to be seen before rationality and goal-oriented action takes over.

In this sense, there is something remarkable about the events in which we feel that we are at a loss. They carry an existential meaning exactly because the alien

¹⁶ Sara Ahmed: *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham 2006, 21.

¹⁷ Ahmed: *Queer Phenomenology*, 7.

¹⁸ Ahmed: *Queer Phenomenology*, 5 f.

¹⁹ Ahmed: *Queer Phenomenology*, 7.

element challenges the habitual and the rational in us. The habitual is comfortable and familiar, to break with it entails an existentially loaded event. However, without this challenge, posed by the unfamiliar to the familiar, life becomes repetitive, inanimate, dull and void of attention. It is through this challenge that we as subjects are “unmade and remade by the course of time”.²⁰

2. *Domestication and the indeterminate*

If epistemology leaves out the element of the alien, the explanation of the process of knowledge acquisition will short-circuit. Consider for example this passage by Alva Noë from his book *Varieties of Presence*:

A surprising and fascinating consequence of the idea that we need understanding to perceive is that it is impossible to perceive real novelty. [...] To perceive something, you must understand it, and to understand it you must, in a way, already know it, you must already have made its acquaintance. There are no novel experiences. The conditions of novelty are, in effect, the conditions of invisibility. To experience something, you must comprehend it by familiarizing work of the understanding. You must master it. Domesticate it. Know it.²¹

According to Noë, the process that occurs in order for us to experience something is a form of domestication. Although I regard Noë’s work as very helpful when trying to explain the connection between perception and knowledge, at this specific point I detect that there is something going wrong. It seems that Noë discusses knowledge as equivalent to visual perception, since, in the above quote, he claims that; “the conditions of novelty are, in effect, the conditions of invisibility”. Here, Noë skips an important part of the event, since the unknown does not become known in the same way as something becomes visible.

Later on, Noë writes: “Sensory events alone, without skill and understanding, are blind.”²² This raises questions concerning the example I have outlined in the previous part. I agree with Noë that understanding is required in order for us to have perception in the first place. But as I have pointed out from the start, there is a mode of understanding that is the beginner’s perspective, a perspective that exists before there is a rational observer’s perspective.

The passages that I quote from Noë are related to a discussion on sensorimotor understanding. In these passages, Noë points out that there are certain prerequisites for our perceptual experience, without which there would be no experience in the first place. Noë emphasizes the embodied actions that grant us a temporally and spatially unified perception of the objective world. He writes:

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 228.

²¹ Alva Noë: *Varieties of Presence*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2012, 20.

²² Noë: *Varieties of Presence*, 123.

“And the basis of this access is my mastery of the ways in which my movements produce sensory change.”²³ Here, he refers to the fact that we can access the objective world in perception, but that this access builds on skillful action, i. e., our understanding builds on this skillful action. I am sympathetic to Noë’s enactivist approach to visual perception. I agree with his main tenet that: “*What we perceive is determined by what we do*”.²⁴

In a minimal sense, I do agree that attention is a faculty that requires agency. But the role of agency in attentive acts is not the same as it is in other more defined goal-oriented and skillful actions that we perform in perception, since attention also depends on the alien, unfamiliar, and undefined elements that the perceptual world addresses us with. The specific metaphor that Noë uses to describe perceptual actions, that of domestication, is ill fitted. All of our perceptual actions cannot be understood under the description of domestication; the term is especially badly compatible with what I have said concerning attention and its close relation to the alien. My concern here is that the implication that knowledge simply requires a process of domestication, will lead to misconceptions.

Domestication is not an exhaustive description of the process of knowledge, the visual does not correlate with the knowable in a straightforward way, and we *do* have novel experiences. The question here is: what characterizes *these* experiences? In *contrast to what* are they novel? My suggestion is that the novel, the alien and the not-before-seen stand in contrast to our habitual ways of perceiving. This entails that to have a novel experience is not simply to perceive a new object, it also consists of a new *way of seeing*, i. e., a perceptual action that breaks with the habitual ways of seeing.

When I am faced with something unknown to me – although my understanding, my perceptual skills, my habits, and my judgment play an important part in that experience since they carry the proficiency without which understanding would never develop – the alien element itself is something that is beyond my projections. Bernhard Waldenfels writes: “The fact that the own and the alien are interwoven does not mean that both of them fit into an encompassing order or are even subject to a fundamental order. The alien call which draws us into the alien experience comes from elsewhere.”²⁵

In this sense, there is something about the alien that brings with it a *disturbance* in our conception of an order.²⁶ What Noë points out when he appeals to skill and understanding are *prerequisites for the possibility* of experience, since a

²³ Noë: Varieties of Presence, 20.

²⁴ Alva Noë: Action in Perception. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2004, 1.

²⁵ Waldenfels: Phenomenology of the Alien, 80.

²⁶ Fuchs: The Alien and the Self, 149.

complete lack of understanding could not amount to perceptual experience. But if everything that I perceive would be based on previous knowledge and habit, then there would not be any such action as attending to what is happening, there would not be what I have previously described as presence in one's perception.

Since our experience also includes, and builds on, elements of the alien, this reveals that the concept of the habitual is understandable in relation to the possibility of a disturbance of the habitual. Noë is aware of this when, in the conclusion of *Varieties of Presence*, he writes: "My focus has been on the way these skillful practices open up the world, by affording access. But pictures, models, habits can also hold us captive, as Wittgenstein suggests in *Philosophical Investigations*."²⁷ He continues:

Can we escape the captivity of our habitual structures, of our language and models? [...] Our captivity is never total. Which means that this tension between the ways our understanding opens up and the ways it closes off the world for us is a conversation we can't help but to keep having.²⁸

This is much in line with the phenomenological account of the alien that I have described above. However, there is a narrative to be told about how our understanding opens up the world that is quite different from the story of domestication that Noë partly relies on.

3. "Attending to" as an act of refraining from domestication

To attend to something carries an ethical and existential meaning, it is a particular form of perceptual action that signifies exactly a refraining from domestication. And this *refraining from* permits us to perceive novelty. To paraphrase Hauke Brunkhorst, to attend to something "means an attitude to one's natural and social environment and to other people and other things that does not compel this otherness to be under one's own will".²⁹ Like in Wittgenstein's remark on the green color of a leaf, there are elements present in perception regardless of our will. Even if we could *imagine* a green leaf as red or black, or wish for it to be yellow, it will still stay green. The leaf does not change color by the workings of our will. In this way, there is what Merleau-Ponty calls "the enigma of the brute world",³⁰ in perception the visible world stays constant and unified even though our relation to that world can change. The color of the green leaf is con-

²⁷ Noë: *Varieties of Presence*, 153.

²⁸ Noë: *Varieties of Presence*, 154.

²⁹ Hauke Brunkhorst: *Adorno and Critical Theory*. Cardiff 1999, 62. Here Brunkhorst actually talks about Adorno's concept of *mimesis*.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, 156.

stantly green despite our projections on the world. The distinction here is sharp and clear-cut.

The sensorimotor workings that Noë refers to function with or without distinct and clearly defined conscious effort. The movements of our eyes and our body that permit us to see a unified visual world in the first place are to a certain extent pre-reflective processes, which is not to deny that the initially pre-reflectively accomplished movement can become a conscious action determined by our will. Yet, this distinction becomes counterproductive if we make it too clear-cut. The concept of pre-reflective that I use here entails that the unconscious elements are elements that *could be* brought to consciousness. For example, my eyes move constantly, scanning the visual field. I do not usually move my eyes consciously, but *I could* also move my eyes intentionally/consciously. This in-between characteristic of the sensorimotor realm is also a characteristic of attention. We can be more or less present in our sensorimotor actions; in a similar way, we can be more or less present in our perception. So, even the event of perceiving the unfamiliar, the unknown, or the alien requires some minimal workings of the will in that we are *engaged* with something, although that something is not yet clearly defined.

Alva Noë is apparently aware of this ambiguity of agency when he writes: “Perceptual experiences are ways of coming into contact with the world, not ways of building up or constructing representations of ways things are or might be. Perception is, in this sense, a non-intentional relation to the world.”³¹

In this sense, the visual realm does not yield to our will and intentions, through and through. And the act of attention is ambiguous since it is an act of *refraining* from projecting one’s own habitual points of reference on the alien.

Let us return to the example of walking around in a new part of the city. It might not be completely wrong to call this effort to familiarize myself with the new environment, a ‘process of domestication’, but it is not entirely accurate either. When walking around a new environment in order to familiarize myself with it, I tacitly understand that this environment will not adapt to my habits, my desires and my will without friction. When I am moving around, looking at things, figuring out the relations between different locations, I know that in order to understand the place, I will have to refrain from projecting. The effort and the actions of perception involved here have to permit uncertainty. I have to act in accordance with the fact that what is in front of me is not clearly defined for me.

I could perhaps make use of a map in such a situation, and the use of the map entails that I need to rely on something external that functions as an aid in my

³¹ Noë: Varieties of Presence, 73.

interpretation of my surroundings. I do not need a map if I move around in an area that I already know, since in this case habit and memory can guide me. In this sense the map is also, like the foreign part of the city, something new to me. In order to learn to read a specific map, I need to read it in relation to learning to know a new area, in this case my knowledge of both the map and the area stem from my understanding of the relation between the two. So, in this case neither my surroundings, nor the map, are known or clearly defined for me, if they were, the map would be superfluous.

The real situation in which a map of a city is actually used is not a context in which the viewer of the map can determine exact relations between the map and the cityscape, the relations between the two *are established during the process* of getting to know the foreign part of town. In this way, the agency that Noë correctly understands as a requirement for us having perception in the first place is activated most pertinently when we are facing the unknown. These situations of disorientation are the ones that require active conscious perceptual engagement. Without the alien, engagement would become less necessary, thus Noë's enactivist theory is highly compatible with the phenomenology of the alien.

Avner Baz shows how this indeterminacy plays a central role in our experiential life when he writes:

The world as it presents itself to us perceptually and to which we find ourselves already responding prior to theoretical reflection of explicit judgment – is, in some yet to be clarified sense, indeterminate, and its solicitations (the responses it calls for, or calls forth) are therefore indeterminate as well.³²

Note that Baz points out how this entails something “yet to be clarified”. If we just skip this hardly defined part of the process, we end up in an inaccurate epistemology. The important point established here is that the philosophy of perception has to be able to describe the event of perceiving something new, unknown, unfamiliar or alien; without this it will fall short by necessity.

We can of course, like Noë, *in a metaphorical way* describe the unknown becoming known, as the invisible becoming visible, but this does not give us a viable account of what is going on. I could say that once I get to know a new part of the city with the help of a map, the cityscape now has become visible to me, but it was not invisible to me before I learned to connect the figures on the map with my environment, and when the city becomes understandable to me, when I am able for example to make the right connections between the map and the city and navigate in the new environment, nothing invisible has become visible. Accumulation of knowledge is a gradual process, whereas the distinction between the

³² Avner Baz: Motivational Indeterminacy: In *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (2016). 1–22, 2.

visible and the invisible is sharp. The question concerning how our perceptual experience comes about entails in this sense another story than the narrative of how our knowledge comes about. And I agree with Noë that this process involves sensorimotor skills, judgment, and the will, but seeing is still not to be described in the same way as knowing.³³

That is, when the unfamiliar becomes familiar, or the unknown becomes known, due to a certain unity of perception, we do understand that the objective world has not changed; still *our relation* with the world has changed. Avner Baz shows how it is important to distinguish two different modalities of perception here; he writes:

The power we have to give things *perceptual* unity and sense – before we give them cognitive or objective unity and sense – comes out most strikingly and dramatically in the moments in which we come to see things differently while knowing that, objectively, they have not changed.³⁴

To attend to the world is in effect a different action compared to willingly domesticating the world.

4. *The reciprocity of the intentional arc*

The discussion above is related to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "intentional arc"³⁵ that describes "the passage from the indeterminate to the determinate".³⁶ He writes: "The precise and completely determinate world is again first presupposed, certainly no longer as the cause of our perceptions, but rather as their immanent end."³⁷ Hubert Dreyfus describes this process as follows:

The *intentional arc* names the tight connection between the agent and the world, viz., that, as the agent acquires skills, these skills are 'stored', not as representations in the mind, but as more and more refined dispositions to respond to the solicitations of more and more refined perceptions of the current situation.³⁸

³³ Visual metaphors have a long history within epistemology. There are manifold reasons for why knowledge has been connected to the visible in philosophy. For an account of this development, see Antony Fredriksson: *Image, Vision, Record: A Cultivation of the Visual Field*. Åbo 2014.

³⁴ Baz: *Motivational Indeterminacy*, 14.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 33.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 33.

³⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus: *A Phenomenology of Skill Acquisition as the basis for a Merleau-Pontian Non-Representationalist Cognitive Science*. 2002, 1.

URL = <<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/pdf/MerleauPontySkillCogSci.pdf>>

This framework is at the core of enactivist theories of perception, the main idea of which is that we achieve understanding primarily through skillful perception. Lastly, I will show how the Merleau-Pontian concept of an intentional arc carries a more radical meaning that does not contradict the enactivist framework, but rather shows how the situation is actually much more ambiguous than the enactivist theorists would admit. Merleau-Ponty does not simply claim that knowledge requires a process of more and more refined and skillful perception, the arc also signifies a return to a beginner's perspective that is phenomenologically distinct from that of the knowledgeable observer.

When we think about a knowledgeable observer, the actions of this person are different in character compared with those of an unknowing beginner. For example, a mapmaker does need to get the relations between the cityscape and the figures on the map right; there has to be the same number of streets in the map as there are in the part of the city that the map represents. In this sense, the mapmaker is required to have rationalized and refined knowledge about the city that he represents in the map. A rational and observational mode of perception is required in the practice of making a map. Conversely, if anyone could from the start have the same rational observational perspective on the city that the maker of the map has, the map and the use of maps in general would become superfluous. Thus, the skillful perception of the mapmaker is a different form of perceptual action than the attention of the person who for the first time tries to find his orientation in a new part of town. Once I know the city as the mapmaker does, my attention to the cityscape gradually becomes less emphasized. In the beginning, the process of learning is in this sense more attuned to perception and the faculty of attention, towards the end of the process attention becomes more redundant as habit takes over.

An important difference between the two perspectives in the example above is that, whereas the tasks involved in making a map as a proper representation of a certain area are goal-oriented and clearly defined, the situation of finding one's orientation in a new part of a city is much more open ended. We might describe the process of getting one's orientation in a new place, as Dreyfus does, as a process of more and more refined and fine-grained perception in connection to a more and more refined disposition. By distinguishing different landmarks and comparing them with others, through triangulating my position in relation to other positions in the extended spatial world and through axiomatic thinking, I am able to perhaps find my foothold in a new area in the sense that I start to understand my position in relations to other positions. I can start to see how different places are connected. These tasks may play an important role in finding my orientation, but once this goal of establishing my position in relation to other spatial positions is achieved, I might still feel that the neighborhood in the

new city is alien. The achievement of knowing my position spatially does not tell me anything about what is specific for exactly this place. Rationality does not reveal my existential relation to a certain place. Axiomatic thinking can only work when the task that is to be performed is clearly defined. In goal-oriented actions, it is clear what refined or fine-grained can mean, in relation to how certain perceptual actions become more or less precise and skillful, whereas, in an open-ended situation the parameters are yet to be established. Orientation in the sense of feeling familiar with a place is not the same thing as establishing a rational observational perspective.³⁹

The problem with the fixation on domestication in epistemology is, as I see it, that it does not properly explain the role of indetermination. The theory of knowledge as domestication does not acknowledge the kind of tension I describe above, as it considers the process of knowledge as an event in which this tension is resolved from the start. There is nothing wrong *per se* with describing the process of knowledge as a form of domestication, to get my orientation in a new part of the city with the help of the map involves *to some extent* to domesticate, to make the unknown known. But even this event of domestication starts from a situation in which the alien world is not yet made one's own.

To habituate a place does not necessarily mean that one changes that place according to one's will and intentions. This trait of restraint makes attention unique in comparison with goal-oriented acts. The existential importance of refraining from transforming the world in accordance with one's own desires and intentions is exemplified by the act of attending to what is going on despite one's own involvement in it. And, this practice of attending also requires a certain effort and skillfulness, but of a very different kind than the skill and rationality required in domestication.

Merleau-Ponty gets close to the gist of the tension at play when he describes attention as something miraculous:

The act of attention creates nothing, and nothing less than a natural miracle (as Malebranche more or less said) can make spring forth precisely these perceptions of these ideas that are capable of responding to the questions I ask myself.⁴⁰

He goes on to talk about discoveries within developmental psychology concerning how infants learn to discern colors. He refers to the contemporary understanding (during his time of writing) among psychologists that infants (before the age of 9 months) only can differentiate between the colored and the achromatic. Then the next step is that the child is able to discern between warm

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty writes: "The designation of objects never happens after recognition, it is recognition itself." *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 29.

and cool colors, and eventually between actual colors, shades of colors etc. This could be seen as a deficiency in children's understanding of their world of perception. But Merleau-Ponty turns this line of thought on its head, when he writes: "On the contrary, psychologists themselves were simply not yet able to imagine a world in which colors are indeterminate, or a color that is not a precise quality."⁴¹ This developmental psychologist's perspective is prone to look past the fact that we will constantly, throughout our lives, find ourselves in a perspective from which the world is not readily deciphered. Our lives are not a one-way development in which the world, piece by piece, becomes more rationalized and domesticated.

An important part, which Dreyfus' interpretation of the Merleau-Pontian concept of intentional arc leaves aside, is that this arc signifies a reciprocal movement. At the one end of the arc is the beginner's perspective and at the other end is the skillful observer's perspective, the arc facilitates a movement in both directions in our phenomenal life-world. In this way, the tension between attention and the habitual is a reciprocal movement. The alien becomes habitual, but through the manifold existential events in our lives, the habitual also becomes alien. In this way, "opening up our experience for rediscovery of the world, like the infant's perception of the world of colors. Our attention usually turns quite naturally to those elements that are alien to us; this is part of the modus of attention as a faculty. In facing the alien "we are interrogating our experience precisely in order to know how it opens us to what is not ourselves".⁴²

Waldenfels writes: "The question that arises here is how that which evades competent description and explanation can nevertheless be brought into view and expressed."⁴³ And the answer to this question has to do with the way in which attention functions within this tension between the known and the unknown. The miraculous element of attention is that it breaks with habit, because it shows how our understanding can contain the indeterminate. In Waldenfels' view, the alien is not opposed to understanding, it is a point of reference within our understanding, since "alienness begins in one's own house."⁴⁴ This is what pertains to the miracle of the world "responding to questions I ask myself". If the world, beyond my habitual way of perceiving it, would be nonsensical to me, there would be nothing miraculous about this relation.

Now we could ask: What, then, is this indeterminate world like? Are the colors different for infants, are they less distinct, are they invisible? To answer this

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 32.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, 159.

⁴³ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 30.

⁴⁴ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 16.

question would require that I could compare my sense perception as an 8-month old with my current perception, and this is empirically impossible since my experience of perception cannot be made into an object comparable with another object. What I can quite intuitively say, though, is that I am rather sure that my experience of colors was more attentive when I was a kid. There is an existential dimension to this question since here we are in fact talking about different ways of being – phenomenologically different experiential states. The indeterminate nature of my experience as an infant was probably more related to perception than to habit, and this meant that I was much more struck by colors back then compared to now. I can sometimes get back to this experience that is full of attention; this does not perhaps make the blue sky bluer, since, as we saw in Merleau-Ponty, ‘the act of attention creates nothing’, but it marks a different kind of relation to the blueness of the sky in comparison with an already domesticated way of perceiving. The ‘presence’ that I have discussed earlier in this text, makes a difference in a situation. Presence does not pertain to the act of creating, but rather to the act of discovering.

One particular aspect of this experience of the world as novel is that in this case attention is turned toward the external world. When facing the unknown, I have to rely on my ability to attend through my perception, not so much on my memory, thinking, and reflection. This is not a categorical distinction, but a gradual one. It is a question of emphasis.

Conclusion

So, let us return to our initial question: what happens when I move to a new city and walk around in a part of town that is completely unknown to me – what happens between that moment and a situation later on when that same place is no longer alien to me, when I have gotten to know it, or when walking through the streets has become habitual?

It is not enough for us to claim that in this example we are dealing with two different modes of intentionality. Here the distinction is more radical. The position of the beginner constitutes an event in which intentionality has not yet gained a proper foothold, thus the environment in that moment is still alien for the subject, i. e. it is perceived as beyond ones clearly defined intentions, desires and habits. This is the event in which attention plays a key role. Attention constitutes an engagement with the world in open-ended situations. As a faculty it works as a counterpoint in relation to intention. This ambiguity is not to be resolved. As both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty note, in their distinct ways, perception contains both intentional and non-intentional aspects. Merleau-Ponty

writes: “This ambiguity is not an imperfection of consciousness or of existence, it is their very definition”.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*, 347.