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Manuel DeLanda. "Materialist Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Perception"

Sheldon Richmond

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Manuel DeLanda. *Materialist Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Perception*. Bloomsbury Academic 2021. 224 pp. $81 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350263949); $26.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 781350263956).

Manuel DeLanda puts forward the astounding thesis that perception has contents that are not theory-laden. This thesis is astounding from the point of view of the theory-laden nature of perception that has dominated the philosophy of science, even before Kuhn, Quine, Feyerabend and Popper. DeLanda's thesis of the objectivity of perception is still astounding from the tamer theory-laden version argued by current philosophers and sociologists of science, where only observations as done within the institutions of science, according to the rules of procedure for scientific experimentation, theory development, and testing, are theory-laden. DeLanda does not explicitly draw the conclusion that observation can be unladen by theory from his argument that visual perception largely involves pre-conceptual content that has objectivity about which even the perceiver can be mistaken. However, a gestalt view of DeLanda's book can give one the impression that DeLanda is saying between the lines that the thesis of the theory-laden nature of observation has no feet to stand on given how perception occurs in the real world.

DeLanda develops his thesis of how perception uses its objective content when we as physically embodied agents act in the real world, including the social world. DeLanda uses concise but intensive argumentation for his thesis, in stages, that he bases on the psychology of visual perception, brain studies, neuroscience, neural net simulations, and even neurophilosophy. Still, neither his thesis nor his argumentation involving discussion of those diverse fields is for the faint of heart. How can the ordinary, *normal* philosopher come to grips with DeLanda's book? Even those normal philosophers, versed in neurophilosophy, and versed in the discussion of neural nets, might find DeLanda's arguments from diverse studies terribly difficult to comprehend. His conclusion of objective content of perception (pre-conceptual and pre-theoretical) is contrary to the dominant view of the theory-laden nature of observation/perception. Most philosophers of science take as paradigmatic that theory as central has moved from a matter of controversy to, if not a dogma, a fundamental premise. For the normal philosopher working within a paradigm where observation as theory-laden is central, arguing as DeLanda does is incomprehensible.

The questions arise: Would it help us to grasp the nature of DeLanda's apparently extraordinary thesis by at least looking at the focal problem of his book? Also, would looking at DeLanda's own socio-intellectual network, and the background problems of his intellectual colleagues, help us to better grasp his thesis of perception as having objective content? From the book title itself, and from his own concise Introduction, one might expect DeLanda to give away his socio-intellectual context: hard-core materialism of Patricia and Paul Churchland synthesized with the soft phenomenology of perception developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, according to DeLanda's Introduction, his version of materialism is not so hard: materialism can allow for both the non-reduction and the non-elimination of mental properties with a dash of the emergence of mental properties within a material world. Moreover, DeLanda's version of the phenomenology of perception does not require a single uniform self-aware subject, but a multitude of mini, partial,

consciousness-free modules working together to produce perceptions that have objective content regardless of our self-awareness of the perceptions. We see without having to realize what we are seeing for use in our actions; and often, though successful in our actions, we can make mistakes in our attempts to understand and verbalize what we see. At the least, if we can't put DeLanda's theory and argument within the ordinary context of hard-core materialism melded with soft-core phenomenology, what questions does DeLanda ask? In the Introduction, DeLanda seems to be posing a very specific and focused question where a quasi-scientific answer is expected. The question is: how did human visual perception evolve with the brain among our pre-human ancestors, as well as our early hominin forebears, before homo sapiens evolved with civilization and language? 'We spent hundreds of thousands of years as part of hunter-gatherer communities, with a material culture of stone tools and bound by egalitarian social norms but without linguistic abilities. If the content of the visual field was structured by language, how are we supposed to explain our survival in those conditions? We can acknowledge that our lives as hunter-gatherers did produce adaptations that are social in nature... but most of the brain machinery that underlies visual perception evolved prior to our becoming humans' (2). In other words, DeLanda, raises the specific question: How did hominins evolve the perceptual mechanisms that we currently use as homo sapiens?

One might think that only this question guides the concisely stated discussions and arguments of the four chapters of DeLanda's book, (1. The Contribution of the World, 2. The Contributions of the Body, 3. The Contributions of the Brain, 4. The Contributions of the Mind) and that DeLanda is basically sidestepping the problem that has guided the current view of most philosophers of perception/observation as theory-laden or at least linguistically shaped. Mind and thinking, continuously from Plato through to Kant, and forward into current cognitive science and linguistics, is inner speech. But how can mind and thinking occur in a material world? Even if visual perception is pre-conscious, pre-conceptual, and pre-linguistic, it occurs only in living things: stones don't see. DeLanda, apparently, avoids what has become the *hard problem* (in the terminology of David Chalmers). To think so would be a shortcoming of the reader—caught in the details of DeLanda's argumentation, where DeLanda seems to focus very narrowly on one single theme: perception pops up in the brain as a property and function of neural workings through the interaction of layers of neurons, and neuronally based modules that operate together without any self-awareness on the part of the perceiver. We see and then do, and mostly successfully without being able to say how nor why: how did the batter hit the ball without being able to consciously track the flight of the ball at over 90 mph?

However, DeLanda shows that his ultimate goal is to track a theoretical path through the material world which we, one day, will be able to explain with the use and further development of the tools forged in this book; how mind as a real property pops up through small material steps from and within the material world: 'we did not bother to show how we can go from the level of neural processing by mindless agents to the level of phenomenal experience. Bridging this gap constitutes the *hard problem* of consciousness... We fully accept the idea that the brain monitoring its own activity is the key to the solution to the hard problem' (129). But how to get there—how the

brain gets there from mini unconscious modules is 'the key to the solution.' Indeed, DeLanda admits that as of now, he does not have a solution to the hard problem, but at most has shown the way to decrease the difficulty of the hard problem by dividing the problem into smaller sub-problems, and showing how to develop solutions to those sub-problems, though admittedly not having the final word on their solutions. Dividing the hard problem into smaller sub-problems 'points to the direction we must follow to find the solution [to the hard problem]: a methodology that combines analysis and synthesis, starting at the bottom and moving upward' (139). We start with mini-modules, then move to multiple layers of mini-modules, and then finally to multiple semi-aware agents interacting as a collectivity of partial consciousnesses forming what we think of as an aware and conscious self.

DeLanda has the traditional body-mind problem not only at the back of his mind, but also as a goal requiring continued research and discussion. Using this research project, so DeLanda argues, the emergence of consciousness from the material world loses its mystery and becomes an eventually soluble problem among other soluble theoretical or philosophical problems, rather than an insoluble mystery. Perhaps the body-mind problem can be solved, not all at once—and this I think in itself is a large contribution to the solution of the problem—by working with manageable sub-problems as envisioned originally in the early days of cybernetics, especially in the research of W.S. McCulloch and other pioneers in cybernetics (‘What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain,’ 1940).

Sheldon Richmond, Independent Scholar