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Review of "Varieties of Presence"

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**Book Review | Varieties of Presence**

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**Introduction**

Nöe’s latest book is not meant to develop a new theory of perception but to present his old theory - the sensorimotor theory - in a new way. There are essentially two components to the project Nöe undertakes in the book. The first is to ‘investigate the phenomenon of presence’ by distinguishing some of its more important varieties. This will be something like a phenomenological investigation - one aiming to capture the apparent character of our mental lives, or to say what different types of presence there seem to us to be. The second component of the project is to offer an explanation of what presence is. This he does by appealing to his sensorimotor theory of perception, which he renames ‘actionism’. What is new here then is a) the claim that presence-to-mind is constitutive of perception and of many other psychological formations too - notably including (many forms of) thinking, b) the claim that the sensorimotor theory of perception provides the conceptual resources needed to provide a satisfying account of what presence, in all its forms, consists in. So the first phase of the project defends an account of mentality on which to have something in mind - whether in thinking or perceiving, is to have something *before* the mind. (It is not clear what he wants to say about, for example, imagining, desiring and intending, but one suspects he would be keen to treat these too as cases of having something imagined, desired or intended in - and so before - the mind.) And the second phase defends the claim that to have something before the mind is to have ‘access’ to it, or for it to be ‘available’ (where to have access to something is to have sensorimotor knowledge of how to ‘come to grips’ with it).
It is clear that Nöe is very excited about his sensorimotor account of ‘presence’. He thinks it can solve a nest of philosophical problems about mind, knowledge and reality that have been at the centre of philosophical disputation at least since Descartes. By unearthing a dimension of cognitive life that has been neglected in analytical philosophy of mind (though not in phenomenology) - ‘sensorimotor understanding’ or ‘sensorimotor knowledge’ - he thinks he can explain how mind makes genuine contact with empirical reality in perception. He also believes that his sensorimotor theory of perception delivers a concept of presence-to-mind which is general enough to lay the foundation for a unified account of mentality as a whole. The hallmark of this philosophy of mind, as Nöe sees it, is that it does justice to all the richness of conscious life as we know it (gathering up the insights of the phenomenological tradition), is based on rigorous argument (as all good analytical philosophy should be), and provides for a robustly naturalistic science of mind (of just the kind cognitive science seeks). It would be an extraordinary accomplishment to construct a view that satisfied phenomenologists (who seek to describe ways things appear to or are presented to mind), analytical philosophers (who seek to clarify certain basic concepts) and cognitive scientists (who seek to discover or model the causally necessary conditions of cognition).

I will argue here that there are significant problems with both aspects of Nöe’s project. His phenomenological investigation of types of perceptual presence (which turns on the familiar phenomenological proposal that we treat hidden aspects of perceived objects as having a kind of presence to mind in experience despite their being hidden) runs together, with disastrous consequences, types of perceptual presence that should be kept apart; and his application of the notion of presence-to-mind to thinking as well as to perception - his ‘general theory of access’- is even more unappealing than it is bold. Not only that, there is a fundamental conceptual problem with the very idea of presence-to-mind on which both his phenomenology and his theory is based. Any one of these problems would ensure the failure of Nöe’s project - all of them together strongly suggest that the attempt to bring phenomenology, analytical philosophy and cognitive science together, is most likely to have the effect of obscuring whatever value these three disciplines may reasonably be thought to have.

Two concepts of presence

Nöe begins his preface with the assertion that ‘The world shows up for us in thought and in experience, it is present to mind. This phenomenon, the phenomenon of presence, is the basic phenomenon in the whole domain of the mental.’ (p. xi)
There’s a tension already evident here between two concepts of presence. The claim that the world is present to mind, as opposed to the claim that it seems to be present to mind, is consonant with one concept of presence. The claim that the ‘phenomenon of presence’ is the most fundamental of all mental phenomena, is consonant with another. On a narrow concept of presence it will be restricted to cases of genuine perception in which there really is something in the perceiver’s immediate environment that is presented to them. On a broad notion, the concept will naturally extend to cases in which there really isn’t anything in the perceiver’s immediate environment that is presented to them.

It would be better to characterize the narrow concept of presence as presence-to-a-subject, or to a perceiver, than to characterize it as presence-to-a-mind, since everything that has this type of presence is something that really is present in a given animal’s environment and is perceived by that animal. In an important and interesting sense this notion of presence or presentation is not a psychological notion. It is the concept of a certain kind of relation between a perceiver (an animal) and a perceived object (paradigmatically, a medium sized material object). Anything that is present in this sense to one creature at a given time can also be present in this sense to another creature at that time. On this concept of presence, perceptions are presentations that consist in the presence of an ordinary object to a perceiver, and so, they are partially constituted by the ordinary objects that are presented to perceivers in them (such that a perception, \( p \), of an ordinary object, \( o \), could not exist if \( o \) did not exist). Though it is not a straightforwardly psychological concept, it is the concept of something that is relative to a perceiving subject: everything that is present to a perceiver in perception is also present in that perceiver’s environment, but not everything that is present in a perceiver’s environment will be something that is present to the perceiver.

It is worth noting too that this narrow concept of presence will be extensional. If Jocasta is present to Oedipus and Jocasta is Oedipus’s mother then Oedipus’s mother is present to Oedipus (whether he appreciates this or not). This is not to say that the narrow notion of presence requires us to deny that things can only be present to subjects under a certain description, or in a certain way. That would be phenomenologically very implausible. All it requires is that we assert that the very thing that is present to Oedipus as Jocasta is in fact Oedipus’s mother (despite not being presented to him in that way or under that description.)

The broad concept of presence on the other hand purports to pick out something genuine perceptions have in common with hallucinations, dreams, imaginings etc. Whatever this is, it can’t be the real presence of an ordinary object to a perceiver. If this concept of presence is the concept of a relation, it cannot be the concept of an ordinary relation between a perceiver and an ordinary object. The tradition offers us a choice between two sorts of view here, one relational the other not. Either the broad notion of presence has been construed as
the relational notion of the real presence to mind of private mental objects (as in sense-datum views), or it has been construed as the non-relational notion of the seeming presence to mind of ‘intentional objects’ (as in representational or intentional views). This last is a non-relational conception of seeming-presence because some intentional objects, like Hilary Clinton, are ordinary objects and some, like Hamlet, aren’t, and nothing (not even a mind) can stand in any kind of relation to something that does not exist.

On both these traditional views presence is squarely a psychological phenomenon: it is the notion of presence-to-a-mind and not the notion of presence-to-a-perceiver. This is evident in the fact that objects can have this sort of presence even if, like the objects of fictional imagination and hallucination, they are not really present in the subject’s real environment (immediate or otherwise). The broad notion of presence can also be expected to be intensional rather than extensional, such that, if Jocasta is present to Oedipus’s mind at t, it will not follow from the fact that Jocasta is Oedipus’ mother, that Oedipus’ mother is presented to Oedipus’ mind at t. (The possibility that his mother is really presented to his mind despite his having no appreciation of this fact is excluded. On the broad notion of presence what is present to the mind - whether conceived as private mental object or as intentional object - can’t have features it is not presented to the relevant mind as having.)

Defenders of the narrow notion of presence (McDowell and Martin come to mind here - though this notion has, to date, received far too little explicit philosophical attention) have to hold that the only type of psychological configuration that consists in presence is genuine perception, and that, if any other psychological forms seem to consist in it, this is a false appearance. On this view there just is no such thing as genuine presence-to-a-mind. Genuine cases of presentation are treated as cases of presentation to a subject (and these are all perceptions), mock cases of presentation are treated as cases of merely apparent presentation-to-a-subject, not as genuine cases of presence-to-a-mind. A view like this will face its biggest challenge in providing a plausible analysis of hallucination - but it is on quite strong ground when it comes to other psychological forms (imagining, thinking, willing etc.) Indeed one of the leading attractions of this position might be taken to be that it will generate no temptation at all to treat desire, intention, pleasure, pain, fear, joy etc. as cases of the presence to mind of what is desired, intended, rejoiced in etc.

Defenders of the broad conception will want to treat genuine perception in basically the same way that they treat hallucination, and a vast array of other mental kinds. Indeed they will be at least tempted to see in the concept of presence-to-mind the key to understanding mentality in general. They will find the idea that something is present-to-mind in thought, desire, imagination, memory and perception (and perhaps also in pleasure, joy, fear, regret, resentment, etc.) hard to resist, and they will offer an account of what it is for something to
be present-to-mind which is meant to be flexible enough to cover all these kinds of case. Thus sense-datum theorists try to distinguish between different kinds of mental object (simple, complex, vivid, faded etc.) and representationalists try to distinguish between different kinds of representational content (conceptual, non-conceptual, demonstrative, non-demonstrative etc.) in order to accommodate the contrasts between different mental forms.

Whilst Nöe aligns himself explicitly with a narrow conception of presence (‘False presence isn’t a species of presence, and the apparent visual experience of a nonexistent object isn’t a species of perceptual awareness’. p. 43), he is also very obviously committed to treating presence as a pervasive, if not as a fundamental, feature of mentality at large. There’s a basic conflict between adoption of the narrow concept of presence, and the attempt to generalize the notion of presence to cover non-perceptual modes of mindedness. This is because there are so many such modes that seem constitutionally indifferent to the distinction between what exists and what does not.

It certainly seems preferable to argue from the premise that we really can imagine and think about what does not exist, to the conclusion that thinking and imagining do not consist in presentation relations, than to argue from the premise that thinking and imagining consist in presentation relations, to the conclusion that we only seem to be able to imagine and think about what is not.

This is a powerful line of thought. It is, for example, very hard to see how imagining things that exist could plausibly be treated as genuine imagining, whilst imagining things that do not exist is treated as only apparent imagining. But even if it is resisted, there is another that is even more powerful. For part of what is so appealing about the view that perception consists in the genuine presence before the perceiver of an ordinary object is that it makes it possible to exploit the real presence of a perceived object in a subject’s physical environment, and the features it really has, in attempts to make the apparent character of perception intelligible. On this sort of view we can say that presence-to-a-perceiver is a kind of presence-in a perceiver’s surroundings, and that how an object appears is a function, not of how it is experienced, but of how it is, and what its environmental conditions are like. (For more on this sort of view see my (2011) ‘Representation, Presentation and the Epistemic Role of Perceptual Experience’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 19: 1, 5-30.) The attractive idea that for a perception to consist in the presence-to-a-perceiver of an ordinary object is for it be partially constituted by that ordinary object, is more readily intelligible if we take it that a mental configuration can only be partially constituted by an ordinary object if that object really is in the more or less immediate vicinity of the subject. We could not take this to be so if we treated thinking of Aristotle, or even of absent but real friends, as cases of presentation. For in these sorts of case there just
is no ordinary object that is appropriately present in the subject’s immediate surroundings
and that could enter into the constitution of the thought.

The tension between the broad and the narrow concept of presence fractures Nöe’s project
at its core.

Varieties of Perceptual Presence

Given that the attempt to investigate the different ways in which the world is (or seems to
be) present-to-mind is the project of phenomenology (certainly as Husserl conceived it) it is
surprising and worrying that Husserl is totally absent from Nöe’s text. That is not to say that
Husserl would not have agreed with some of Nöe’s proposals. He would, for example, have
agreed that despite the fact that we cannot perceive all of an object at any given time, we do,
at any given time, perceive whole objects and not merely collections of surfaces. He would
also have agreed that we should not turn to imagination or the intellect in order to explain
how whole objects and not just collections of surfaces are present to our minds in
perception. This is good phenomenology. But he would be bewildered by many of Nöe’s
phenomenological claims - and we should be too. It is barely intelligible never mind faithful
to our experience to say such things as: ‘We experience how things are, and we experience
how they merely seem to be.’ (p. 68); ‘The back of the tomato, the wall’s color, the detail in
the room, the window’s shape - these are all hidden from view.’ (p. 18), or again ‘...the
nature of our access to the front [of the tomato] is of a kind with that of our access to the
back.’ (p. 21); and to say that ‘In a way, for perception, everything is hidden. Nothing is
given.’ (p. 19) is hard to square with the very idea that there are indeed ‘varieties of
presence’ for Nöe to investigate, never mind with the bold assertion that the phenomenon of
presence ‘is the basic phenomenon in the whole domain of the mental’ (p. xi).

Nöe’s fundamental phenomenological observation is the respectable one that we perceive
whole objects not just those aspects of objects that face us at any given time.

Some will insist that we don’t really experience the visual presence of the occluded
parts of the things we see. At best, we think we do. I demur: It is bedrock,
phenomenologically speaking, that the tomato looks voluminous, that it looks to
have a back...The puzzle is that we take ourselves to have a sense of the presence in
perception of something that is manifestly out of view. (p. 16)

As soon as he identifies this phenomenon he likens it, mistakenly, to two other distinctive
types of perceptual presence. The first is what he calls, ‘perceptual constancy’. The color of
a wall or the shape of a window will appear constant despite changes in the way it is
presented: When you open a rectangular window, it seems consistently rectangular to you despite the fact that you view its shape from a constantly changing angle. The second has to do with the distinction between what, in a perceived scene, a perceiver is perceptually attending to at any time, and what, in that scene, they are not attending to at that time.

Crucially, Nöe is quite wrong to treat all three types of perceptual presence in the same way.

These features of the world - the tomato’s body, the wall’s color, the detailed environment - fall within the scope of your perceptual awareness despite the fact that they are, in a straightforward way, out of view, or concealed, or hidden, or absent. They are present in experience - they are there - despite the fact that they are absent in the sense of out of view. They are present precisely as absent. (p.18)

But the real color or shape of a table will not, in any sense, be out of view, or hidden, or absent, given suitable viewing conditions. On the contrary, the real color or shape of the table is precisely something one sees by seeing the particular way it appears from this place or that. And sometimes, the way it appears from this place or that (in the case of its shape, from directly above it; and in the case of its color, in full daylight) will coincide perfectly with the way it really is. This contrasts very strongly with the case of occlusion, for we do not see the occluded aspects of objects by seeing the aspects that are open to view. Indeed, we do not see them at all: They are totally invisible! Rather, in this case, to see something as a ‘voluminous object’ at a given time is for certain of its surfaces to be visible and for certain of its surfaces to be totally invisible at that time.

The contrast between the way aspects of a perceived scene to which one attends perceptually are present to one, and the way aspects of a perceived scene to which one does not attend perceptually are present to one, is different again. Though in this case too the problem is the simple one that what Nöe claims to be ‘in a straightforward way out of view, or concealed, or hidden, or absent.’ are really things that are straightforwardly in view, unconcealed, present etc. When my visual attention is focused on my laptop screen I can still see the lamp on my desk, the watch, the crumbs, the coffee cup, the painting on the wall, the red chair by the fireplace etc. etc. These are not absent in any sense, nor are they ‘present in absence’ - for I can see them. And I can see them as well as I can see my laptop screen - it is just that I am not presently attending to them. I do not ‘have a sense of their presence’ (as I might have a ‘sense’ of trees emerging out of the dark at dawn, or of boats on a lake almost hidden by a thick fog), for I can plainly see them sitting there in their usual places.
This conflation of three kinds of perceptual presence prepares the way for Nöe’s ‘general theory of access’ which I discuss below. Both the case of perceiving shapes and colors and of perceiving what is visible but not focused on, are unlike the case of occlusion because they consist in things or properties being visible, not invisible. That Nöe is confused about this very dramatic phenomenological contrast must help to keep the unhappiness of his ‘actionist’ theory of presence hidden from his view.

Thought and Perception

Despite the seriousness of these phenomenological blunders, perhaps the phenomenologically least appealing feature of Nöe’s ‘actionism’ or his ‘general theory of access’, is the proposal that thinking, no less than perceiving, is presentational. (‘When I think of Aristotle, Aristotle is present to my mind. But he is not perceptually present. He is thought present.’ p. 26) On the one hand, the very things Nöe stresses about the nature of perception (that to perceive is to encounter reality not to represent it etc.) make it powerfully implausible to characterize thinking as a kind of perceiving, on the other, a sharp contrast between perceptual and discursive phenomena is, for compelling reasons, fundamental to both of the primary traditions in twentieth century philosophy. If, alone in your flat, you think ‘they have murdered my friend’, you may be said to have your friend in mind, but that is not to say that he must be, in any sense, before your mind. If you do some imagining at the same time as you have the thought then, in one sense, he may be said to be (or seem to be) before your mind: but you don’t have to do the imagining in order to do the thinking. If, after a search, you find his mutilated lifeless body on a warehouse floor, you will almost certainly make the judgment - ‘Oh no! They have murdered my friend!’ - and you may do this at the very same time that you see him lying there. But in this case it is obviously not the thinking that is responsible for presenting your friend’s body to you - it is the perceiving. There are many reasons this is obvious. For one thing - you can have the thought without perceiving its topic, and you can perceive its topic without having the (or any related) thought; for another, one could arrive at the relevant judgment (not just the supposition) on the basis of testimony rather than perception, and in that case the gory topic of the judgment need not be presented in any sense. Sometimes our thinking is fused with imagining and sometimes with perceiving. But (non-demonstrative) thought does not have to be thus fused, and even when it is - and at the very time a subject is having a thought its topic is, in some sense, presented to them, it is not the thought they are having that presents, but the perceiving or imagining with which it is fused. (The fifth and sixth of Husserl’s Logical Investigations are devoted to explication of this important phenomenological concept of fusion. It is a notable concept, because it allows us to preserve a robust contrast between e.g. thinking and perceiving whilst allowing that they can form
genuine psychological unities and not mere associations. These investigations also describe
the various ways more complex psychological formations like judging or desiring are rooted
in simpler presentational formations.)

To see just how far Nöe is prepared to take the view that thinking is (at least sometimes) a
kind of ‘extended perception’, here he is writing about how he stands cognitively to an old
friend who is living abroad:

Dominic is in my thoughts and imaginings. It would be odd to say that he is present
to me perceptually. After all, I don’t see, hear, touch or smell him. He is too far
away for that. But it would also be false to insist that my sense of his presence is
entirely non perceptual...we can say that Dominic is located at a point in my visual
access space that is very remote, and so, correspondingly, his visual presence for me
is very faint. But critically, my sense of his presence is not entirely devoid of
perceptual quality. (p. 34 - italics are mine.)

This passage really does contain the claim that though I am in Paris and my friend is in New
York, for him to be ‘in my thoughts and imaginings’ is for him to be very faintly visible to
me. It is hard to take this seriously, but perhaps it is worth trying. Nöe says that Dominic is
perceptually present to me not in the way that very distant trees and buildings might be
faintly perceptually present to me, but in the way that the backside of a tomato is
perceptually present to me when I see the tomato on the desk in front of me. The key notion
he says is that of ‘availability’, and this is a matter of having a ‘sense’ of how I would have
to move myself about in order to be able to perceive its currently hidden aspects. Just as for
the backside of the tomato to be perceptually present to me is for me to have a ‘sense’ of
how I would have to move in order to bring it into view, for my friend to be perceptually
present to me though far, far away, is for me to have a ‘sense’ of how I would have to move
in order to bring him into view. (‘...it certainly seems reasonable to say that an absent friend
can show up in one’s thoughts in very much the same way that the occluded portions of
things we see can show up in perceptual consciousness.’ p. 27) The only difference, Nöe
bewilderingly suggests, is that I have to move much further to bring my friend into view
than I need to move to bring the backside of the tomato into view.

But first, of course, it is only the backside of my friend when he is in full view that might be
said to be perceptually present in the way that the backside of the tomato is perceptually
present when it is in full view. Second, if there is a way in which the back side of the tomato
is perceptually present to me when it is sitting on the desk in front of me, it does not consist
in something being faintly or dimly perceptually present - as perhaps a group of trees at
dusk in a thick fog, or a quiet rumble of traffic in the far distance, might be said to be faintly
perceptible. Third, if Nöe were right that my friend counts as faintly perceptually present to me though hundreds of miles away, because I have a ‘sense’ of what I would have to do to make his perceptual presence more vivid, it would follow that the whole perceptible universe would be faintly perceptually present to me at any moment, since I have, at any moment, a ‘sense’ of what I would have to do ‘come to grips’ with any particular bit of it (get in a space ship etc. etc.). I rather suspect that this last objection may not persuade Nöe. He might even think of it as an engaging ‘discovery’ of his sensorimotor theory. (For more criticism of his analysis of perceptual presence or perceptual availability in terms of what he calls ‘object and movement dependence’ see below.)

It should be noted that the idea of ‘thought-presence’ is not only phenomenologically unhappy, it is epistemologically threatening, too.

In perception, as it might be put, we encounter the very things we try to characterize in judgment. The very idea of judgment - of trying to get things right - comes with the idea of being confronted with things (and the very things one judges about), or it doesn’t come at all. It is a basic feature of our epistemic predicament that we find ourselves answerable to the world, and the very idea of answerability requires both something for which we must answer (judgment), and something to which we must answer (the perceived world). If we characterize judgment in passive terms (as a case of being confronted with, or in the presence of, an object), we lose track of the idea that to judge to do something - the sort of thing that can come off, or fail to come off. If we characterize perception as an activity (‘embodied coping’, ‘active exploration’ etc. etc.), we lose track of the idea that to perceive is to find oneself landed or saddled with how things are, and with it, the idea that to judge is to make oneself answerable to something (something that is independent of and indifferent to one’s cognitive activities and projects).

Nöe says that both judgment and perception consist in the presence before the mind of what is judged about or perceived. To have something presented to one (an ultimatum, a trophy,) is precisely not to perform an action - no more than is having something given to one to perform an action. But he also says, in spelling out his actionist theory of presence, that to be presented with an object is to perform (or to be poised to perform) a certain sort of activity: the activity of ‘coming to grips’ with it, or ‘skillfully accessing’ it. There is a powerful conceptual conflict here between the grammar of the leading terms of the theory - ‘presence before’, ‘present to’ etc. - and the leading claim of the theory. This threatens the intelligibility of the theory (making it seem somehow mysterious how something could be a case of being confronted with an object and a case of doing something with an object). But even if we set this aside, grave epistemic difficulties are generated whether we treat
judgment and perception as alike in being ways of coming to grips with the world (‘actionism’), or as alike in being cases of the presence of certain objects to the mind.

Sometimes Nöe focuses on the idea of presentation (being present, presence), and when he does so he characterizes both perception and judgment in passive terms. This has the effect of jeopardizing the very idea that to judge is to make ourselves answerable to something. At other times he focuses on his ‘general theory of access’, and when he does this he characterizes both perception and judgment in active terms - as ways of grappling with the world. This has the effect of jeopardizing the very idea that to perceive is to be - or to find oneself - confronted with the world. Both strategies make the idea of justification unintelligible. For the idea of justification requires that we be able to mark a clear distinction between an activity or performance that stands to be justified, and something enjoyed or suffered (or undergone etc.) which is apt to justify or to furnish a justification. A good deal of the work McDowell sets himself to do in Mind and World is to argue that conceptual capacities can be drawn passively into operation and not just actively exercised: despite Nöe’s frequent attempts to align himself with McDowell, his assimilation of thought to perception plays fast and loose with a distinction McDowell treats with great care.

Finally it ought to be noted that the proposal that thinking is a kind of ‘extended perception’ requires nothing less than a total repudiation of the whole of the analytical tradition in philosophy. This could be perfectly respectable - though suspiciously bold - were it not for the fact that Nöe consistently writes as if he thought of himself as working within that tradition - or at least, with it.

We can distinguish two philosophical strategies for making our capacity for thought intelligible. The first, which deserves to be called ‘traditional’, appeals to facts about what is going on in our minds when we think (cognitive science has made this tradition seem modern by switching traditional talk about minds for scientific-sounding talk about brains and what goes on in them); the second strategy (characteristic of post-Fregean analytical philosophy) appeals to a connection between thinking and talking/writing and (at least in its later phases) to the social and historical nature of language. On the first strategy to think is to have certain sorts of things going on in one’s mind or brain; on the second (at least in its later phases) it is to participate in an essentially public practice.

Perhaps the worst thing about the popularity of cognitive science in philosophy of mind since the sixties, is that, after the analytic tradition had achieved so much by pursuing the second strategy (finally making a decisive break with the frustrating habits of centuries of mentalistic modes of explanation), it has made the first sort of strategy seem compulsory to so many of us once more. The claim that to think is to have what one thinks about present to
one’s mind, could seem plausible only to one already powerfully committed to a virulent form of mentalism of exactly the kind repudiated so convincingly by Ryle and Wittgenstein in the forties and fifties.

**Enactivist Direct Realism?**

I turn now to Nöe’s main thesis about presence-to-mind: ‘Presence is availability’ (p. 32). Whether it is interpreted as a relatively modest view or as a strikingly bold one, it too, is broken-backed.

If construed as a relatively modest account, it comes out as a view about what has to go on in the mind if an ordinary object is to seem to be present to it. Seen this way, it is, at best, a kind of supplement to a Kantian treatment of the same topic. As such, even if successful, it must fall critically short of providing what Nöe treats it as providing, namely, an account of what genuine perceptual presence is. If construed, on the other hand, as a very bold account of genuine perceptual presence, it is, at best, wildly implausible, and at worst, empty or incoherent.

It is not easy to work out which version of the theory Nöe is committed to, since there are as many formulations that suggest one interpretation as the other. For example, these two formulations make it look like it must be the relatively modest view he wants to defend:

\[
\text{I propose that perceptual consciousness requires the joint operation of sensitivity to the object and also what I am calling sensorimotor understanding. (p. 24)}
\]

\[
\text{The actionist approach agrees with the conceptualist that what enables the barrage of sensory stimulation to rise to the level of perception is our possession of a certain kind of knowledge, but the knowledge in question is not straightforwardly conceptual, it is sensorimotor. (p.69)}
\]

But it looks like it must be the much bolder one in these two formulations:

\[
\text{Perceptual presence is availability. (p. 19)}
\]

\[
\text{Presence is availability. This is my main idea. (p.32)}
\]

And there are also numerous formulations that are ambiguous as between the stronger and weaker form of the theory:
Our sense of the presence of objects and properties around us, in perceptual experience, is understood in terms of our being skillfully poised to reach out and grasp them. (p. 70)

We can see what there is when it is there, and what makes it the case that it is there is the fact that we comprehend its sensorimotor significance. (p.20) (It is not clear whether we should read the passage I have italicized here as ‘what explains its being there’ or ‘what its being there consists in’.)

The first and more modest type of view has a certain plausibility, as long as the capacity for self-movement is treated (along with the capacity to be sensibly affected by objects, and the capacity to make judgments about them) as one of at least three kinds of necessary condition for perceptual experience. But in this form the view is not only disappointingly familiar (from phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), it is a view about the wrong topic. On this construal the view must be treated, not as an account of what is needed if an ordinary object is to be present to the mind, but as an account of what is needed if an ordinary object is to seem to be present to the mind. (There are traces here of the same conflation of two concepts of presence that has already been discussed.) This is because this sort of view inevitably tells us about what the psychological conditions of experience are, and conditions of this type can be met not only when there really is an ordinary object that is perceived, but also in cases in which there isn’t. The capacity to be sensibly affected, the capacity for sensorimotor understanding and the capacity for judgment, can be activated even in the absence of an ordinary object that is perceived. So the topic of such views is not what genuine perception consists in but what the necessary conditions of perceptual experience are (where perceptual experience is treated as coming in at least two varieties: genuine perception and hallucination.)

What explains the possibility of perfect hallucination is the fact that it is possible for our sensorimotor skills to get triggered by the wrong thing, or by nothing at all. (p. 67 - italics are mine.)

This is one of the central confusions in Nöe’s text so it is worth explaining it more fully. He consistently presents obviously phenomenological claims as if they were claims not about how our experience strikes us in having it, but about how it really is. (‘The world is present to mind.’ p. xi; ‘The tomato is right there, front and back, for us to explore.’ p. 21) He also consistently rejects sense-datum and representational views on the phenomenological ground that it seems to us that we are in direct contact with the world in experience. (‘After all perceptual experiences don’t feel like representations. It doesn’t seem to us when we see, as if what we experience is represented in our head.’ p. 70)
This carelessness threatens to eradicate the philosophy of perception before it has made any kind of contribution. For the whole point of this subject is to argue from claims about how experience obviously seems to us, to claims about how it really is or must be. The representationalist and the sense-datum theorist that Nöe dismisses so regularly and enthusiastically both start from the assumption that ordinary objects seem to be present to our minds in perceptual experience. (And if they started with any other assumption, what reason could we have to treat them as trying to talk about perceptual experience rather than something else?) Both representationalist and sense-datum theorist then argue that given the possibility of hallucination, perceptual experience just can’t be the way it seems so obviously to us to be. The sense-datum theorist argues that what seems to be the presence before the mind of ordinary objects is really the presence before the mind of extra-ordinary private mental objects. The representationalist argues that what seems to be the presence before the mind of ordinary objects is really the setting in of a certain kind of state with a representational content (such that nothing at all is really present to our minds in experience - including the representational state or its content.)

Some philosophers have taken a less direct approach to their subject matter. Kant - the great authority on questions about the necessary conditions of experience - adopts a very ingenious strategy here (and has caused enormous trouble for his interpreters by doing so.) On a sensible way of reading him, his aim is to argue that unified minds would be impossible were it not the case that ordinary (mind-independent) objects seem to be presented to them in experience. Once he has established this (which he tries to do in the Transcendental Deduction), he can argue that since unified minds obviously are possible (who will challenge this claim?), ordinary objects must seem to be presented to the mind in perceptual experience. This conclusion is still fraught with difficulties, since it is by no means clear whether it follows from it that ordinary objects really are, or must really be, presented to the mind in perceptual experience.

Husserl, in sharp contrast to all of the above (and here again interpretative controversies proliferate), seeks only to capture accurately the way experience seems to us in having it. After he has completed his descriptive analysis (which, despite an alarmingly gigantic output, he never did) he should still have nothing to say - at least qua phenomenologist - on the topic of what experiences, or ordinary objects, really are. (Notoriously, he did not remain as silent as he ought to have done on these topics, and most of the remarks he did make about them, at least after the first phase of his philosophical work, seem to commit him to a strong form of idealism.) There is a sense then, not at all well understood in the phenomenological literature, that phenomenology can make no contribution to the philosophy of perception at all, since it never tries to construct an argument from claims about how experience seems, to claims about how it really is. We can’t establish the truth of
claims about what perception really is by adding nuance and detail to claims about how perception strikes us.

Finally it is worth noting that the disjunctivist need not (and, I think, should not) offer any positive account of what a perceptual experience is. Their efforts should be focused instead on disarming any argument that purports to show that perception can’t consist in the presence before the mind of ordinary objects. If they are successful in this, they can prevent the need for any philosophical theory of perception from arising in the first place. (Which would leave us, in a sense, where we started; namely, with the idea that to perceive is to be presented with ordinary objects.)

So if Nõe’s account is treated as consisting in claims about the necessary conditions of perceptual experience it has a certain limited interest. But, on this construal, it is an attempt to identify the psychological conditions for perception (it says that sensory stimulation, plus sensorimotor understanding, plus conceptual understanding, equals perceptual experience), and as such it is committed to providing the sort of account that will apply equally to hallucination and to genuine perception. This is an account of seeming presence to mind, not of genuine presence to mind. Nõe does not treat it as such. Perhaps that is because he sometimes thinks he is really defending a much stronger view, on which, perception consists in activations of sensorimotor understanding.

This strikingly bold view is hard to evaluate. If Nõe really is claiming that the perceptual presence of an ordinary object to a subject consists in the object’s being available to the subject, then a host of objections crowd in. I will list some as briefly as possible:

Most things are available to us at any time, in the sense that we could bring them into view by moving, but very few things are perceptually present to us at any time.

Some things that are perceptually present aren’t available - flashes of lightening, sudden explosions, reflections (of many kinds), gaps between objects, holes, holograms. Sudden flashes and bangs can be perceptually present in a pre-eminent sense - but they are not in any sense ‘available’.

What is available, typically, are objects: it is objects that we grab, manipulate and put to use. But we also perceive properties (and not just by perceiving the things that have them since sometimes we can see that something is e.g. blue without being able to see what it is). If perception did consist in availability, colors etc. would not be perceivable.
If perceptual presence is availability we have no explanation of the dramatic phenomenological distinction - which plays such a large role in Nöe’s text - between the way that the front side of an object is present and the way that the backside of an object is present. Both front and back sides are equally available, but, even granted that the hidden surfaces of things can be perceptually present to us, it is phenomenologically preposterous to suggest that they are both present in the same sort of way. (‘If the front of the tomato is given, then so is the back. And the nature of our access to the front is of a kind with that of our access to the back.’ (pp. 20-21); ‘…from the actionist standpoint there is no sharp line to be drawn between that which is and that which is not perceptually present. The front of the tomato is maximally present; the back a little less so; the hallway even less so. And to these gradations in the degree of perceptual presence there correspond gradations in the degree to which the motor-sensory relation we bear to the object, quality, or situation, is movement and object-dependent.’ p. 26) Nöe has constructed an explanation of what it is for us to have, at a given time, ‘a sense of’ aspects of a perceived scene that are not in view at that time (one that Husserl has already developed in enormous detail), but he offers it to us - absurdly - as an explanation of what it is for things to be in view at that time. As an account of ‘presence in absence’ it is promising (but perfectly familiar from the history of phenomenology) - as an account of presence full stop it is a non-starter. (Ironically, this shows a deep consonance with representational views - the leading feature of which is that they provide an account of apparent presence consistent with the denial that there is any such thing as real presence. I will take up this point again in the conclusion.) As I look out of my window at the walls, roofs and chimney pots of the tenement buildings of Edinburgh, I seem to be seeing whole buildings and whole roofs and whole chimneys, not mere collections of surfaces. But nevertheless it would be an extraordinarily peculiar thing to do to try to explain what it is for the facing surfaces of the buildings I can see to be perceptually present to me by appeal to an account of what it is for their hidden surfaces to be hidden. It does not make this project any less peculiar to insist that there is some sense in which the buildings’ hidden surfaces are presented along with their facing surfaces. After all, does it not suffice to say that for a whole building to be in plain view - as all the buildings I can see from my window are - is for certain of its surfaces to be open to view and certain of its surfaces to be hidden from view? A surface has to exist to be hidden, so to experience a set of surfaces as currently hidden is not at all to fail to experience them. Of course, the idea that we could use an account of what it is to experience a set of surfaces as hidden, to provide an account of what it is to experience a set of surfaces as open to view, is hardly appealing (and it is nothing short of bewildering from a phenomenological viewpoint). But this is precisely what Nöe offers us here. That the account is original does nothing to recommend it.
If to be available is to be apt for being ‘brought into view’, then the definition of perceptual presence is circular. It reads ‘To be perceptually present is to be apt to be brought into view (‘made perceptually present’) by movements of a subject’s body.’ (‘...my sense of the visual presence of the tomato’s back...consists in practical understanding that simple movements of my head and body in relation to the tomato would bring the back into view.’ (p. 20, my italics)) What we want from the theory is precisely an account of what it is for something to be in view, once its movements, or mine, have brought it into view.

Nöe claims that perceptual consciousness is transactional in the following sense - movements of the perceiver’s body manifestly produce changes in the ‘motorsensory relation’ to the object; and changes in the object also manifestly produce changes in the ‘motorsensory relation’ to the object. Now, first, it is not clear what Nöe means by ‘motorsensory relation to an object’. The sentence in which he sums up ‘actionism’ is, like many others in his text, very hard to follow: ‘Intuitively, we are perceptually in touch with an object when our relation to the object is highly sensitive to how things are with the object and to the way what we do changes our relation to the object.’ (pp. 22-23) If we can take this to mean that how the object perceptually seems to one is highly sensitive to changes in one’s position relative to it and to changes in it, then (disregarding for now the fact that this re-introduces into the definition precisely the notion of perceptual seeming that we want defined) counter-examples crowd in. As I gaze at the full moon through the branches of a tree under which I am standing, the moon is, if anything, dramatically more perceptually present than is the tree: but the moon is relatively unavailable to me (my ‘motorsensory relation’ to it is entirely unaffected both by the movements I make and the changes it is undergoing) whereas the tree is very much available: I could climb it, chop it down, carve my name in it etc. etc. The moon is much more distant in my ‘access space’ than is the tree, but it is, if anything, much more perceptually present than the tree. There are many cases like this: The buildings outside my third floor window are just as perceptually present as the children’s toys on the windowsill just in front of me, but they are much more remote in my ‘access-space’. So they should, on Nöe’s view, be much less perceptually present. Again, if I know that the hidden surface of an object is very hot (or prickly or covered in lethal poison etc.), but it has handles that are heat insulated on its rear surfaces, then its rear (hidden) surfaces will be closer in my ‘access space’ than its facing surfaces, despite the fact that my ‘sensorimotor relation’ to these hidden surfaces is much less object and movement dependent than are its facing surfaces. On Nöe’s view then, these hidden surfaces will be ‘more perceptually present’ than its facing surfaces.
Conclusion

In this book Nöe defends a ‘general theory of access’ according to which both perceiving and (many kinds of) thinking (he never says which kinds do not fall within the scope of his analysis, or why) are ways of skillfully grappling with the world. This view would work much better if he coupled it, not with the view that ‘the phenomenon of presence is the basic phenomenon in the whole domain of the mental’ (p. xi), but with an outright rejection of the very idea that the concept of presence has an important role to play in the philosophy of mind. This is so because it is only the perceptual ‘presence-in-absence’ of the hidden surfaces of perceived objects that could possibly be explained by appeal to the idea that, whilst invisible, they are nevertheless available to us. It is only some very bad phenomenology that could make this sort of account of presence in general seem ingenious rather than bewildering. More than this, I have argued that right at the heart of the project is a conceptual confusion about the distinction between what I have called presence-to-mind (which can be conceived either as a relation to mental objects that really are present to mind, as in sense-datum views, or as consisting in the seeming presence of ‘intentional objects’ to mind, as in representational views), and presence-to-a-perceiver. The notion of presence-to-mind which dominates the text despite his explicit rejections of it, is apt to be applied not only to genuine perception but to hallucination, dreams, imagination, and perhaps also to thought, will and desire. The notion of presence-to-a-perceiver is apt only to be applied to genuine perception.

What is perhaps most interesting about this text is that it purports to put at the center of the philosophy of mind a concept that for some time now, due to the dominance of representational theories, has been quite deliberately avoided. Although Nöe writes frequently of representational theories he always mischaracterizes them - at least he mischaracterizes that family of views in mainstream analytical philosophy of mind that are developments of the view Armstrong defended in *A Materialist Theory of Mind* (1968) and subsequent papers. His mistake is always to treat them as views on which to perceive is to have ‘inner’ dealings with (to ‘construct or consult’) mental (or neural) models of or stand-ins for, the ordinary objects we seem to perceive. This may be an apt characterization of representationalism in mainstream cognitive science - on which, perhaps, perception happens in the brain and consists in some sort of operation performed on information-bearing neural structures (‘representations’) - but it is not an apt characterization of representationalism in philosophy. The whole point of representationalism in mainstream analytical philosophy of perception is to give an account of perception that is borrowed from established accounts of belief, and which, consequently, involves no appeal at all to the very idea of presence-to-mind. Instead of appealing to this idea, which struck Armstrong and his followers as hopelessly mentalistic and subjectivist - the representationalist appeals
to the idea that perception is a type of state of an organism that can be said to have a ‘representational content’ because it has a ‘causal role’ or ‘function’. The idea that a state plays a certain causal role in the cognitive life of an organism is an idea that is robustly ‘third-personal’ and entirely independent of metaphysically and epistemologically problematic ideas like being present to a mind. For the representationalist, for things to seem perceptually a certain way to a subject at a given time, just is for the subject to be in a certain state at that time, - one that represents things as being that very way, in virtue of its causal or functional role.

Nöe’s mischaracterization of philosophical representationalism (or his mistaken assumption that representationalism in cognitive science is the same thing as representationalism in mainstream philosophy of mind) is significant - especially given his topic. It shows a failure to appreciate that the primary philosophical purpose of the view is to establish that we don’t need the concept of presence-to-mind (which is allegedly responsible for all the metaphysical and epistemological trouble caused by traditional views on which perception consists in the presence-to-mind of an ‘impression’ or ‘sense-datum’) in order to construct a working understanding of mentality. For a subject to be in a state that represents how things are in virtue of the causal role it plays in the life of the organism, is not at all for that state - or its content - to be present to the subject’s mind. All modern representationalists - as far as I know - are direct realists about perception who want to say that, for a subject to be in such a state just is for them to perceive what the state represents as obtaining. (Thus Nöe’s oft-repeated objection to representationalism - ‘Perceptual experiences should not be thought of as representations...After all perceptual experiences don’t feel like representations. It doesn’t seem to us when we see, as if what we experience is represented in our head. Rather it seems to us as if what we see is out there in the world.’ (p. 70)) - not only misses its target, but also fails to notice what really separates a representational account of perception from a presentational one.

I just said that Nöe’s text purports to put a notion that has been deliberately banished by mainstream analytical accounts of perception right at the center of the philosophy of mind. It seems to me that despite indulging in a great deal of pro-presentational and anti-representational rhetoric, Nöe is really no more a friend to this idea than is the contemporary analytical representationalist. The notion of presence he ends up outlining is not really a notion of presence at all, but rather, at best, a notion of absence. And this is so whether we treat him as operating with the concept of presence to a mind or to a perceiver. That is interesting in itself, because, if I’m right that even in a book about mind that presents itself as championing this pitifully mistreated phenomenon, it is conspicuous only in its absence, it goes to show just how deeply unfriendly to the concept of presence contemporary philosophical culture is. It also generates a powerful irony: Whilst declaring
that the concept of presence is indispensable in the philosophy of mind, he rejects views which, as he sees them at any rate, really do pivot on it, and offers us in their place a view from which it is completely absent.