

# PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION



MAURICE  
MERLEAU-PONTY

# Phenomenology of Perception

First published in 1945, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's monumental *Phénoménologie de la perception* signaled the arrival of a major new philosophical and intellectual voice in post-war Europe. Breaking with the prevailing picture of existentialism and phenomenology at the time, it has become one of the landmark works of twentieth-century thought. This new translation, the first for over fifty years, makes this classic work of philosophy available to a new generation of readers.

*Phenomenology of Perception* stands in the great phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. Yet Merleau-Ponty's contribution is decisive, as he brings this tradition and other philosophical predecessors, particularly Descartes and Kant, to confront a neglected dimension of our experience: the lived body and the phenomenal world. Charting a bold course between the reductionism of science on the one hand and "intellectualism" on the other, Merleau-Ponty argues that we should regard the body not as a mere biological or physical unit, but as the body which structures one's situation and experience within the world.

Merleau-Ponty enriches his classic work with engaging studies of famous cases in the history of psychology and neurology as well as phenomena that continue to draw our attention, such as phantom limb syndrome, synesthesia, and hallucination.

This new translation includes many helpful features such as the reintroduction of Merleau-Ponty's discursive Table of Contents as subtitles into the body of the text, a comprehensive Translator's Introduction to its main themes, essential notes explaining key terms of translation, an extensive Index, and an important updating of Merleau-Ponty's references to now available English translations.

Also included is a new Foreword by Taylor Carman and an introduction to Merleau-Ponty by Claude Lefort.

Translated by Donald A. Landes.

**Maurice Merleau-Ponty** was born in 1908 in Rochefort-sur-Mer, France. Drawn to philosophy from a young age, Merleau-Ponty would go on to study alongside Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Simone Weil at the famous École Normale Supérieure. He completed a *Docteur ès lettres* based on two dissertations, *La structure du comportement* (1942) and *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945). After a brief post at the University of Lyon, Merleau-Ponty returned to Paris in 1949 when he was awarded the Chair of Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne. In 1952 he became the youngest philosopher ever appointed to the prestigious Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France. He died suddenly of a stroke in 1961 aged fifty-three, at the height of his career. He is buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Praise for this new edition:

“This is an extraordinary accomplishment that will doubtless produce new readers for the remarkable philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. This excellent translation opens up a new set of understandings of what Merleau-Ponty meant in his descriptions of the body, psychology, and the field of perception, and in this way promises to alter the horizon of Merleau-Ponty studies in the English language. The extensive index, the thoughtful annotation, and the guidance given about key problems of translation not only show us the richness of Merleau-Ponty’s language, but track the emergence of a new philosophical vocabulary. This translation gives us the text anew and will doubtless spur thoughtful new readings in English.”

Judith Butler, *University of California, Berkeley, USA*

“This lucid and compelling new translation not only brings one of the great breakthrough books in phenomenology back to life – it gives to it an entirely new life. Readers will here find original insights on perception and the lived body that will change forever their understanding of themselves and the world they inhabit.”

Edward S. Casey, *Stony Brook University, USA*

Review of the original French edition:

“It is impossible to define an object in cutting it off from the subject through which and for which it is an object; and the subject reveals itself only through the objects in which it is engaged. Such an affirmation only makes the content of naive experience explicit, but it is rich in consequences. Only in taking it as a basis will one succeed in building an ethics to which man can totally and sincerely adhere. It is therefore of extreme importance to establish it solidly and to give back to man this childish audacity that years of verbal submission have taken away: the audacity to say: ‘I am here.’ This is why *Phenomenology of Perception* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty is not only a remarkable specialist work but a book that is of interest to the whole of man and to every man; the human condition is at stake in this book.”

Simone de Beauvoir, reviewing *Phénoménologie de la perception*  
on publication in French in 1945

Maurice  
**Merleau-Ponty**

Phenomenology of Perception

Translated by Donald A. Landes

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## FOREWORD

### Taylor Carman

*Phenomenology of Perception* is one of the great texts of twentieth-century philosophy. Today, a half-century after his death, Merleau-Ponty's ideas are enjoying a renaissance, attracting the renewed attention of scientists and scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Philosophers in the English-speaking world have over the last fifty years been slow to recognize the significance of his work, which resists easy classification and summary. He had little familiarity or contact with what by the 1950s had come to be called "analytic" philosophy, though his ideas speak directly to the theories of perception and mind that have grown out of that tradition. Nor was he a structuralist, though he saw sooner and more deeply than his contemporaries the importance of Saussurian linguistics and the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose good friend he was and remained until his death in 1961.

Merleau-Ponty also departed sharply from his predecessors in the phenomenological tradition: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. For whereas they proceeded at a very general level of description and argument, Merleau-Ponty regularly drew from the empirical findings and theoretical innovations of the behavioral, biological, and social sciences. He was a phenomenologist first and foremost, though, and one cannot understand *Phenomenology of Perception* without understanding phenomenology.

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first person point of view, in contrast to the reflective, third person perspective that tends to dominate scientific knowledge and common sense. Phenomenology calls us to return, as Husserl put it, “to the things themselves.” By “things” (*Sachen*) Husserl meant not real (concrete) objects, but the ideal (abstract) forms and contents of experience as we live them, not as we have learned to conceive and describe them according to the categories of science and received opinion. Phenomenology is thus a descriptive, not an explanatory or deductive enterprise, for it aims to reveal experience as such, rather than frame hypotheses or speculate beyond its bounds.

Chief among the phenomena, the “things themselves,” is what Husserl’s teacher, Franz Brentano, called *intentionality*, that is, the *directedness* of consciousness, its *of-ness* or “aboutness.” A perception or memory, for example, is not just a mental state, but a perception or memory of something. To think or dream is to think or dream *about* something. That might sound trivial, and yet (astonishingly) this humble, seemingly obvious fact managed to elude early modern (and some more recent) theories of mind thanks to the representationalism and dualism of such seminal thinkers as René Descartes and John Locke.

The Cartesian–Lockean conception of thought and experience – a conception that in many ways still figures prominently in contemporary psychology and cognitive science – tries to give an account of perception, imagination, intellect, and will in terms of the presence of “ideas,” or what Kant called “representations” (*Vorstellungen*), in the mind. Ideas or representations were thought to be something like inner mental tokens, conceived sometimes discursively on the model of thoughts or the sentences expressing them, sometimes pictorially on analogy with nondiscursive images or, as Hume said, “impressions.” But the “way of ideas,” as Locke’s version of the theory came to be known, was problematic from the outset. For ideas are meant to be *objects* of consciousness; we are aware of them; they are what our attitudes are *aimed* at. But this begs the question of intentionality, namely, *How* do we manage to be aware of *anything*? Simply positing ideas in the mind sheds no light on that question, for then our awareness of our own ideas itself remains mysterious. Do we need a further, intermediate layer of ideas in order to be aware of the ideas that afford us an awareness of the external world? But this generates an infinite regress.

Husserl's solution to this problem was to distinguish between the *objects* and the *contents* of consciousness. There is a difference between the things we are aware of and the contents of our awareness of them. An intentional attitude is therefore not a *relation*, but a mental act with *intrinsic content*. Perception is not *of* something, if the "of" in that formula indicates a causal relation to something in the external world, for there might be no such thing – indeed, as far as phenomenology is concerned, Husserl insisted, there might be no external world at all. Perception is instead *as if of* something; it identifies or describes a merely putative object, whether the object exists or not.

Husserl's distinction between the contents and the objects of consciousness parallels Frege's distinction between linguistic sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). To use Frege's own example, the expressions "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" have different *senses*, since they involve different descriptive contents and stand in different inferential relations to other terms, but they have one and the same *referent*, namely the planet Venus. Similarly, for Husserl, my perception of an apple tree in a garden has what he calls a "perceptual sense" (*Wahrnehmungssinn*), namely the content of my sensory experience, including not just what directly meets my eye, but also a vast background of assumptions, memories, associations, and anticipations that make my experience – like the world itself – inexhaustibly rich. For example, I see the tree not just as a physical surface facing me, but as a three-dimensional object with an interior and an exterior, a back and sides, and indefinitely many hidden features, which I can examine further by looking more closely. Similarly, in addition to their apparent size, shape, and color, the trunk looks strong and solid, the branches supple, the leaves smooth, the apples ripe or unripe, and so on. The fact that I have seen trees like this many times in the past also lends my experience a sense of familiarity, which is no less part of my perceptual awareness.

That horizon of significance, which saturates every experience, distinguishing it from every other in its descriptive content, even when they pick out one and the same object, is what Husserl calls the *noema* of an intentional state, as distinct from its *noesis*, or the concrete psychological episode that has or instantiates that content. *Noesis* and *noema* are, respectively, the mental act and its content: the act of thinking and the thought as such, the act of judging and the judgment, the act of remembering and the memory itself. Similarly, on analogy with language, the *noesis* is to the

*noema* as a linguistic term is to its sense, and the *noema* is in turn distinct from the object of consciousness (if there is one) just as the sense of a term is distinct from what (if anything) it refers to.

Husserl's theory of intentionality is thus a paradigm case of what we might call the *semantic paradigm* in the philosophy of mind. Unlike empiricist versions of the theory of ideas, which construe mental representations on analogy with pictures or images, the semantic model conceives of mental content in general – not just the content of thought and judgment, but also that of perception, memory, and imagination – on analogy with linguistic meaning.

Empiricism and the semantic paradigm are two versions of representationalism, and Merleau-Ponty's descriptive account of intentionality in *Phenomenology of Perception* is a repudiation of both. Intentionality, he insists, is constituted neither by brute sensation nor by conceptual content, but by noncognitive – indeed often unconscious – bodily skills and dispositions. The content of experience, which Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl, often describes as a kind of “meaning” (*signification*) or “sense” (*sens*), is not semantic content, but rather the intuitive coherence things have for us when we find them and cope with them in our practical circumstances. Things “make sense” for us perceptually (or not), as they surely do for animals and preverbal children as well. Language deepens and transforms our experience, but only by expanding, refining, and varying the significance we have always already found in situations and events *before* we find it in sentences, thoughts, inferences, concepts, and conversations.

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, intentionality is not mental representation at all, but skillful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity in direct engagement with the world. To perceive is not to have inner mental states, but to be familiar with, deal with, and find our way around in an environment. Perceiving means having a body, which in turn means *inhabiting* a world. Intentional attitudes are not mere bundles of sensorimotor capacities, but modes of existence, ways of what Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, calls “being in the world” (*être au monde*). Indeed, what fascinates Merleau-Ponty about perception is precisely the way in which it makes manifest a *world* by carving out a concrete perspective “in the recesses of a body,” as he would later say.<sup>1</sup> By manifesting itself in our bodily capacities and dispositions, perception grounds the basic forms of all human experience and understanding, namely perspectival orientation and figure/ground contrast, focus and horizon. The phenomenon of

perspective is therefore ubiquitous – not just in sense experience, but in our intellectual, social, personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world.

But what is perspective? Rationalist philosophers like Leibniz, who understood our place in the world in intellectual terms as the relation of a thinking subject to an object, conceived of human knowledge as at best a finite approximation, indeed a pale reflection, of divine omniscience. God's perfect and unlimited knowledge of the universe, they supposed, is the proper standard against which to measure the scope and limits of what we can know. Whereas God's perspective is the ideal "view from nowhere," ours is always a view from *somewhere* – hence, partial and imperfect. And yet the very idea of a view from nowhere is incoherent: a view from nowhere, after all, would not be a view. "To see is always to see from somewhere," Merleau-Ponty says. But how can we understand experience as at once anchored in a point of view and yet open out onto the world? "We must attempt to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective."<sup>2</sup>

It is tempting to suppose that, while the world itself exists objectively (out there), we can know it only through private subjective experiences (in here). A perspective would then be a kind of extraneous superaddition to what there is, a mere instrument or medium, as Hegel put it, by means of which to grasp the world, or through which to discern it, however darkly.<sup>3</sup> Skeptical problems entailed by such metaphors have fueled modern epistemology at the expense of the mystery that inspired them, namely that it is a world – not just images or information – that reveals itself to us in perception. Hegel was one of the first to recommend dispensing with representationalism altogether, and Merleau-Ponty follows him in wanting to overcome what he, too, regards as the crippling effects such models have on how we understand ourselves and the world.

The philosophical mystery that impressed Merleau-Ponty and guided his work, then, has two sides: that we are *open onto* the world and that we are *embedded* in it. The first side of the mystery is the astonishing fact that the world is disclosed to us at all, that our awareness reaches out into the midst of things beyond ourselves, binding us to them in a way seemingly incomparable with the mute external relations in which objects blindly stand to one another. Perception is our "absolute proximity" to things and at the same time our "irremediable distance" from them.<sup>4</sup> The senses

seem to banish, as if magically, the density and obscurity of brute physical reality, opening the world up before us.

The second side of the mystery is that we ourselves are neither angels nor machines but living beings. We come to the world neither as data-crunching information processors nor as ghostly apparitions floating over the surface of the world like a fog. Perceptual perspective is not just sensory or intellectual, but *bodily* perspective. We have a world only by having a body: “the body is our anchorage in a world”; “The body is our general means of having a world.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is misleading to say that we “have” bodies, just as it would be misleading so say that we “have” minds or selves. Better, we *are* minds, selves, bodies. It is equally misleading to say that we “have” a world, as if having a world were a kind of lucky accident, as if it might turn out that we don’t really have one, however much it *seems* as if we do. To say that we are bodily beings is to say that we *are* our bodies, just as saying that we are worldly beings is to say that worldliness is neither a property nor a relation, but our existence. Again, for human beings, to be at all is to *be in the world*.

The looming target of all Merleau-Ponty’s efforts, his abiding philosophical *bête noire*, one might say, was *rationalism*, the idea that *thought* constitutes our essential relation to the world, that for our attitudes to have *content* at all is for them to be, as Descartes said, modes of *thinking*. But perception is *not* a mode of thought; it is more basic than thought; indeed, thought rests on and presupposes perception. As children, we do not learn how to attach thoughts to a sensory world we encounter in the course of already thinking; rather, we learn *how* to think about what we already find ourselves seeing, hearing, grasping: “a child perceives before it thinks.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the intelligible world, being fundamentally fragmentary and abstract, stands out as foreground only against the stability and plenitude of a perceptual background: “the sensible world is ‘older’ than the world of thought, for the former is visible and relatively continuous . . . the latter, invisible and sparse (*lacunaire*).”<sup>7</sup>

One could say, then, that thinking is more like perceiving than rationalists think it is. Why? Not because perception and judgment have the same kinds of intentional content, which just happens to be coupled to different kinds of subjective attitudes, but because thought and perception share many of the same underlying intuitive structures. Thought, like perception, for example, has its own sort of perspectival orientation: we often approach a problem from a different angle, grasp it or lose

sight of it; when we struggle to comprehend something, we try to get our minds around it, and so on. So too, like perceiving, thinking focuses on something bound in a horizon; it distinguishes figure from ground. Even very abstract ideas can be at the center or on the periphery of our attention.

Merleau-Ponty's central philosophical insight about perception, then, is that it is not just contingently but *essentially* bodily. Perception is not a private mental event, nor is our own body just one more thing in the world alongside others. We are consequently in danger of losing sight of perception altogether when we place it on either side of the distinction between inner subjective experiences and external objective facts. Interior and exterior, mental and physical, subjective and objective – these notions are too crude and misleading to capture the phenomenon. Perception is both intentional and bodily, both sensory and motor, and so neither merely subjective nor objective, inner nor outer, spiritual nor mechanical.

The middle ground between such categories is thus not just their middle but indeed their *ground*, for it is what they depend on and presuppose. There are such things as subjective sensations and sensory qualities, but only because we can sometimes conjure them up by abstracting away from our original openness onto the world and zeroing in on the isolated features of things, and on bits of experience that we suppose (rightly or wrongly) must correspond to them, just as we can abstract in the other direction away from ourselves toward a world regarded as independent of our perspective on it.

It is nevertheless possible to draw a distinction for analytical purposes in that primitive middle ground between two aspects of perception that arguably underlie and motivate all subsequent distinctions between subjective and objective, inner and outer, mental and physical. The two underlying or primal aspects of perception are the (relative) passivity of sense experience and the (relative) activity of bodily skills. The Kantian contrast between receptivity and spontaneity, though crude and abstract in its own way, comes closer than other such distinctions to capturing the two essential aspects of perception, namely its sensory and its motor dimensions. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "The structure 'world,' with its double moment of sedimentation and spontaneity, is at the center of consciousness."<sup>8</sup> Those two moments are not sharply distinct, self-sufficient states, but are interwoven and inseparable aspects of a single, unified

phenomenon. They are not, like Kantian intuitions and concepts, discrete parts or ingredients of a composite product, but more like two sides of a coin or two dimensions of a figure. Perception is always both passive and active, situational and practical, conditioned and free.

Perception, then, is the *ground* of both the subjectivity and the objectivity of experience, of its inner feel and its outward “grip” (*prise*) on the world. Perception is not a “mental” event, for we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of mind, but as states of our bodies and our bodily behaviors. Even Descartes had to concede this point to common sense, albeit in trying to coax us out of it by means of purely rational – often strikingly counter-intuitive – arguments to the contrary. We feel pains in our bodies, he admitted, but only because we are confused, for a pain can exist only in a mind. Similarly, we imagine that we see with our eyes, but this is impossible, for seeing is not a physical but a mental event.<sup>9</sup> Like many professional philosophers today, Descartes regarded experiential phenomena as mere appearances, eminently revisable, indeed supplantable, by the discoveries of pure rational inquiry. Our naïve conception of ourselves as bodies, he thought, could be accommodated simply by acknowledging a close causal relation between our physical and mental states. We do not, of course, *feel* like minds housed or lodged in our bodies, “as a sailor is present in a ship.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, for Descartes, the metaphysical fact of the matter is that the relation between experience and the body is not an identity, but a *causal* relation between two substances.

But suppose the body and experience are not just causally connected, but identical. Is such an identity conceptually necessary, deducible *a priori*? Do concepts pertaining to perception entail concepts pertaining to the body? What purely rational inferences to bodily phenomena can be drawn from our best understanding of perception, sensation, recognition, judgment?

For Merleau-Ponty, the relation between perception and the body is neither causal nor logical, for those are not the only ways in which the coincidences and dependencies between the body and experience make sense to us. Instead, all explicit thought about perception is parasitic on a more basic understanding we have of ourselves simply in virtue of being embodied perceivers. We have a pre-reflective grasp of our own experiences, not as causally or conceptually linked to our bodies, but as coinciding with them in relations of mutual motivation. To say that perception

is essentially bodily is to say that we do not and cannot understand it in abstraction from its concrete corporeal conditions. The phenomenal field is neither caused nor defined but *constituted* by the sensorimotor structures and capacities of the body. The structure of perception just is the structure of the body: my body “is my point of view upon the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, from a third person point of view, the structures and capacities of the body are mere contingent, ultimately arbitrary facts about the kinds of creatures we happen to be. And yet those facts cannot manifest themselves as contingent and arbitrary for us, from our point of view, for they just *are* our perspective on the world. The body is not just one more object in the environment, for we do not – indeed *cannot* – understand our own bodies as merely accidentally occurring things. The point is not just that the boundary between my body and the environment cannot be drawn very sharply; what matters is not *where* the boundary lies, but rather *that* there is a difference in principle between myself and my world. My body cannot be understood simply as that chunk of the material world that sits in closest contact with my mind. However vague the material boundary between body and environment may be, it cannot collapse entirely, for an environment is an environment only *for* a body that cannot perceive itself as just one more object among others: “I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable.”<sup>12</sup>

My body is my perspective on the world and so constitutes a kind of background field of perceptual *necessity* against which sensorimotor contingencies show up *as* contingent. Manifestly contingent facts about perception, that is, presuppose (more or less) invariant structures of the phenomenal field, for example perspectival orientation in space and time and figure/ground contrast. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenal field is always a “transcendental field,”<sup>13</sup> that is, a space of possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities *constitutive* of our perceptual world. The body is not just a causal but a transcendental condition of perception, which is to say that we have no understanding of perception at all in abstraction from body and world.

What Merleau-Ponty advances in *Phenomenology of Perception*, then, is in effect a new *concept* of experience. His aim is to realign our philosophical understanding of perception and the body with things we are always

already familiar with before we begin to reflect and theorize. What we can learn from Merleau-Ponty's efforts is thus something we already knew, if only tacitly, something we acquire neither from logical analysis nor from empirical inquiry. In this way, his work performs the recollective function of philosophy as Plato conceived it: to remind us in a flash of recognition what we feel we must already have comprehended, but had forgotten precisely owing to our immersion in the visible world.

# “MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY”<sup>1</sup>

**Claude Lefort**

Translated by Donald A. Landes

From “Cézanne’s Doubt”<sup>2</sup> to “Eye and Mind,”<sup>3</sup> from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Visible and the Invisible*,<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty never ceased meditating upon vision. In the room where he suddenly collapsed one evening in May of 1961, an open book – a book to which he had never stopped returning – bore witness to his final work: Descartes’s *Optics*.<sup>5</sup> Until the very end, his life as a philosopher nourished the question to which his writings always brought new responses: What is seeing? If ever an *œuvre* was riveted to its opening interrogation, it was surely his.

Even before deciding upon the title of his minor thesis, *The Structure of Behavior*,<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty had described the project – like that of his major thesis [*Phenomenology of Perception*] – in terms of a study of perception. Of course for him, perceiving already implies all of the relations of the subject to the world and, first of all, to the sensible. For example, he would never grow tired of returning to the study of the experience of touch and the experience of vision, to the point of finding in the grasp of the two hands, in the interminable reversibility of sensing, and in the imminent and yet impossible coincidence of the touching and the touched, a privileged experience of that flesh that he would make into a substitute for being. But he could only learn from this experience because he had thought through the relation between seeing and the

visible, for this relation reveals most clearly and all at once the exteriority of the world for the body that opens up to it, the distance of the things in front of this body, their absolute alterity, the body's folding back outside of everything that it captures and yet its implication in the visible, the turning back of the visible upon itself that constitutes it as seeing and that causes it to perceive from the very foundation of being to which it adheres.

As diverse as his approaches may be, Merleau-Ponty relates all of his questions to this enigma. He writes about language, but seeks its secret in the painter's vision. The “voices of silence” teach him the truth of literature and even the truth of philosophy, which believes it sacrifices everything to the utterance of sense and yet only reaches us obliquely through its power of awakening our wonder at the contact of being and sends us back to the mute experience always covered over by the mass of established opinions and ideas. For a while he believes he can structure an *Introduction to the Prose of the World* around his work on painting, in which the study of language, the literary phenomenon, and mathematical idealities would come to constitute the raw materials for a theory of expression.<sup>7</sup> When he abandons this rough draft in order to devote himself to the work that was to bring out the foundations of a new ontology, he does not hesitate to shift the working title of his project from *Being and Sense* or *The Origin of Truth* to *The Visible and the Invisible*. He places a study of perceptual faith at the beginning of this great work, after having initially renounced describing the crisis within philosophy. He wants to begin anew from the brute experience of the thing and of others – such as it is given in the gaze, prior to the scientist's elaboration – in order to put philosophical discourse to the test. He refuses to begin from a position of knowledge, even one that, in its very manner of interrogating, is fully aware of everything that it owes to the history of metaphysics. When it comes to this history itself – beginning from Husserl's metaphysics, through which Merleau-Ponty seeks an opening to his own domain, or from others from which he wants to gather what they offer to thought in the present – his intention is not to submit them to the concept, to assign to them an objective status, to articulate them within an intelligible space whose law he would in the end possess. What he aims at in them, which is neither the effect of his arbitration nor their signification in itself, he assures himself of finding through a return to the truth of perceptual experience:

Just as the perceived world endures only through the reflections, shadows, levels, and horizons between things (which are not things and are not nothing, but on the contrary mark out by themselves the fields of possible variation in the same thing and the same world), so the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said. There is no dilemma of objective interpretation or arbitrariness with respect to these articulations, since they are not *objects* of thought, since (like shadow and reflection) they would be destroyed by being subjected to analytic observation or taken out of context, and since we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking again.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, his essays on Bergson and on Husserl, on Machiavelli and on Montaigne, and the introductions he wrote for *Les philosophes célèbres*,<sup>9</sup> bear witness to an openness to thought that makes way for the unthought of the other, for a reconstruction of the past field of discourse that is at the same time the institution of his own discourse. This openness brings about – in the practice of philosophical interrogation – the turning back discovered in the visible where the subject sets himself up, testing out his attachment, his envelopment, and his dispossession.

He writes about politics and history, but always returns to the experience of perception in order to reopen their definition. As early as *Sense and Non-Sense* and *Humanism and Terror*,<sup>10</sup> he doubts that we could ever free ourselves from the contingency of a situation and of a perspective. He shows us that the social and historical field and the world that our eyes open to are, for the same reason, inexhaustible; he shows us that perception and action are, for the same reason, never certain; and he shows us that, for the same reason, we can neither give up the notion of an historical truth nor abandon our faith in the visible. What first draws him to Marxism is precisely the idea that history is only clarified from within itself, that only one particular social formation – the proletariat – provides in its class being the power to decode the becoming of humanity, that its task cannot be entirely conceived nor its sense entirely detached from praxis, and that there is thus no objective criterion for deciding upon the revolutionary project – not in any of its moments. He turns away from Marxism because of his fidelity to his most basic demand: to uncover the illusion of converting the interiority of history into a pure negativity, of concentrating in one place and in one time all of the resources of historical creativity, of embodying in an actual collectivity the authority of the

universal, and of ultimately limiting the indetermination of knowledge and praxis to the behavior of an actor whose identity had been once and for all removed from the interrogation.

In terms of Marx, the only criticism he will offer is of the desire to lead all of the lines of force of history to a center or to construct the entire edifice of society beginning from the productive subject. Yet this is the very criticism he addresses to the classical philosopher, occupied as he is in establishing the conditions of a general mastery of sense while forgetting the initiation to the world that organizes his perception. Thus, in one of his essays he will argue that perception, history, and expression cannot be disentangled, and in a working note he goes as far as affirming that:

the problems of knowing what is the subject of the State, of war, etc., are exactly of the same type as the problem of knowing what is the subject of perception: one will not clear up the philosophy of history except by working out the problem of perception.<sup>11</sup>

To consult only the philosopher's final writings, one might judge that he left behind the pathways traced out by his two important theses. His research is no longer animated by what he had called the "new" psychology; the problems of the functioning of perception seem demoted. In particular, *Gestalttheorie* – in which he once believed he had found a way of breaking away from empiricism – is now abandoned, seeming to him to have lost its initial inspiration. And yet, if we consider precisely what is rejected along with it in the period of *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example, we find Merleau-Ponty rejecting a positive system of explanation that has no other possibility than of leading to realism or to neo-Kantianism, and not at all the notion of *Gestalt* itself that had nourished his reflection twenty years earlier. On the contrary, the notion reappears, extracted from the scientific experiments of the psychologists, and is reintroduced to take control of all of the enigmas of our relations with the world. Merleau-Ponty writes: "The figure on a ground, the simplest 'Etwas' [something] – the *Gestalt* contains the key to the problem of the mind."<sup>12</sup>

What can one say about pure visibility, he asks us, if not that it is born in the divergence [*l'écart*]? But the divergence is not *nothing*, nor is it *something*, nor is it that by which *there is* (in the sense of a condition of possibility). Being as transcendence, then, must be thought in terms of the *Gestalt*.

This notion gives us a principle of differentiation, beneath which we cannot go, because it is neither in the object nor provided by the subject, because it is at once a segregation of the figure and the background and a segregation of the seeing and the visible. It is the formula of a slippage of the same kind between appearing and that which remains latent, such that each visible has its invisible double and can return to itself – the line becomes a vector, the quality a dimension, the image a category, and the sign a symbol. And finally, it is the formula of our own inscription in the field that we see.

We cannot be attentive enough to the fact that Merleau-Ponty entitles his final essay “Eye and Mind.” He thereby names his entire *œuvre*. He gives voice to his desire, which was to circumscribe man’s opening to the world through the eye. Given that this desire seems to govern all of metaphysics, it is all the more important to interrogate it. Is it not Plato already (as Heidegger shows) who pushes the word *eidos* in order to make it designate essence, even though it designated the sensible appearance of the thing, and who caused that which does not appear to the body’s eyes to spring forth for a pure gaze? Did Plato not begin a movement that will sustain vision’s privilege (up until Husserl) and, despite the largest variations, conserve the link from truth to the *intuitus mentis* or to the *Wesenschau*? Let us not be too quick to reduce the mystery of this privilege. We like to believe that the eye is the organ of possession at a distance, that it provides a natural support for the spirit tempted by the capture of being, that in the exercise of its powers we find an anticipation of the withdrawal of thought and the setting up of its domain outside of the sensible. But to conceive of metaphysics as the sublimation of vision would be to forget that metaphysics interprets and modifies vision at the very moment that it subjects itself to it – and one might conclude that this interpretation is not the solitary work of philosophizing individuals. Because the interpretation springs forth at a certain time from collective techniques and from their convergence, which remains to be thought, it would remain true that it implies the institution of a language, the advent of a relation with the world that the life of the body could never justify. This would be to act as if we knew what is sublimated and to forget again that this knowledge emerges in the wake of metaphysics and that our reference to vision is burdened with the prejudices that it has placed upon it. Merleau-Ponty teaches us to return to precisely this forgetting, and thanks to him we have learned to re-interrogate the moment that the

thought about seeing destroys seeing, turns it into its object, and simultaneously becomes lodged there. But his approach does not leave us free to ignore what it owes to the conditions in which it is instituted. Whatever his approach might make us think about vision, vision only draws all of the other questions to itself in virtue of a preeminence acquired in culture. Given the status accorded by Merleau-Ponty to the eye, we must recognize that his thought is inscribed within the orbit of metaphysics. Indeed, the signs of this inscription abound in reading *Phenomenology of Perception*. Its style of argumentation, its desire to address the entire collection of questions the tradition has set out as the domain of philosophy, even the presentation of the work, arranged in such a way as to support the continuous movement of an inspection of spirit – none of this allows us to doubt the identity of the enterprise. As critical as it is of previous systems and of the very notion of system itself, the work bears witness, in the order of its discourse, to an ideal of demonstration and totalization that adheres to the reign of metaphysics.

If we wanted to ignore this adherence, we would fail to stress the audacity of our philosopher, we would preclude ourselves from being able to fully measure it, because he demonstrates this audacity through what Hegel called the patient work of the negative, a work that – from within philosophical thought itself – undermines some of its dominant categories and creates the need for a regime change. Merleau-Ponty acquires the power of decoding this necessity by remaining within metaphysics – which is different from those whose emphatic discourse about the end of metaphysics makes one suspicious that they have not understood anything about its beginning – and this remaining within metaphysics also presupposes, along with the truth of an attachment, the sign of an imprint. In fact, rather than being surprised we should learn from the difficulties and hesitations in the movement of a study that, from its very beginnings, includes the most novel advances. If the language of the "Preface" to *Signs*, "Eye and Mind," and *The Visible and the Invisible* is already spoken in some particular essay in *Sense and Non-Sense*, or in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and if this language is still not understood or intended to the point of requiring the sacrifice of all previously adopted conventions, we are tempted to chalk this up to a weakness. Yet we can only make this judgment by leaning upon the experience that Merleau-Ponty introduced us to; or again, we learn from him which were his enduring insights and which were merely his tentative first steps.

Such should be our reading of the early works: by discovering the influence of the tradition on the early writings, we must not forget that the later writings are what give us the power (at least to a large extent) to recognize this influence. And if we conclude that the status granted the eye still serves the glory of metaphysics, let us not conceal the fact that this idea comes to us from a dialogue with the philosopher who interrogates vision as no other has.

Thus, when we place *The Structure of Behavior* alongside the later works, it reveals both its audacity and its limitations. There is no doubt that we find there the questions that will animate Merleau-Ponty's research until the end (and indeed the very formula of an envelopment of the seeing by the visible). From this early work, in a sense, the stakes are set: to think the unthinkable of metaphysics: the body. But it is not enough to add that such an “unthinkable” can only be named by still situating oneself within the horizon of metaphysics; all that one says about metaphysics finds its justification in the very criticism that attacks it. The works of psychology and modern physiology are invoked in order to produce the refutation of the claims that they had consistently engendered, and whose antinomy denounces the ontological lie that the perceiving organism is a mechanical apparatus, and thus wholly subject to the laws governing the physical universe, or that it enjoys an autonomy that only the operations of consciousness can account for. By making use of their results, it necessarily follows that if the body and its surroundings cannot be defined in isolation, if every attempt to describe the constitution of one presupposes a reference to the constitution of the other, and if every relation of cause to effect or means to end can only be determined in function of a certain given meaning of “configuration,” then the classical distinction between the subject and the object is no longer viable and reflective, Cartesian, or Kantian thought is mistaken along with its adversary, empirical theory. Now from this point of view, Merleau-Ponty remains deeply subject to the philosophical tradition. He only evades the space governed by reflection by continuing to follow its lines of force. For example, he introduces the notion of behavior because it seems neutral to him, as something that cannot be assimilated to objectivist or subjectivist language, but only in order to turn behavior into the object of a pure description, as if the nature of the discourse in which this description takes place were itself unproblematic. He grounds this upon the locating of heterogeneous structures in order to reveal the physical, the vital, and the human as

three dialectically articulated orders of signification, and his interpretation of these structures opens the pathway to the critique of representation and expression that he will subsequently develop. But he does not free himself from a conception of the transcendental that binds him to the philosophy of consciousness. The most that can be denounced in this project is its ambiguity. For although he is committed to turning perception into an event and catches a glimpse of the idea of the body turning back upon itself that opens it up to the world, and although he strips consciousness of its power of construction or constitution – or rather, bankrupts the myth of a coextension of perceiving and the perceptible – he nonetheless reestablishes the unity of the phenomenal world for a transcendental vision. All of the paradoxes are brought together in the idea of a transcendental consciousness that finds itself stripped of the attributes that had until then been inseparable from its definition, that no longer bears the law of its object, that is affected, that implies a history, and that preserves itself as pure seeing.

But these difficulties do not cease with *Phenomenology of Perception* and the long meditation on Husserl that this work involves, even if the problems are now posed in different terms, given that it is now a question of installing ourselves within perceptual life to examine there the birth of our relations with the world, to wonder what the world is and what we are prior to the exercise of reflection, and to no longer deduce the necessity of a philosophical reformulation beginning from the description of behavior and the critique of the body-object. This project itself is not accomplished without some equivocation. In a sense, what Merleau-Ponty wants is to reveal the bodily infrastructure that sustains the edifice of our representations, to lead us to rediscover the shape of the perceived world through a work comparable to that of the archeologist; and yet, this descent toward the deep layers is absolutely distinct from the search for a positive foundation. The truth of the return to the pre-reflective is a result of the need to undo notions that have been constructed for organizing the objective world and the need to decipher the sense that they cover over, and this is accomplished by making contact with a certain praxis, that is, with an experience that cannot be reduced to the laws of what we call matter and mind. Thus, the critique of space, time, and movement, for example – constructions whose principle could not be linked to an activity of the mind or to the mysterious junction of a pure activity and a pure passivity – refers to the situation of a body which

alone holds the secret of the fact of its spatiality, of its temporality, and of its own motivity, refers us to our anchorage in a here and a now, and refers us to the reference the body makes to a given field, articulated according to the primordial reference points of up and down, right and left, behind and in front.

In this exploration of bodily being, Merleau-Ponty does not seek a genesis of spiritual being; he does not reduce the constitution of the intelligible world to that of the sensible one. It is hardly necessary to recall that he explicitly denies every form of psychologism. His approach is guided by the necessity of tying together, at all levels, the experience of an inside and of an outside by following an articulation of interiority and exteriority that is inconceivable for classical theory; it is guided by the necessity of rethinking our sensible life and our life of knowledge according to their encroachment, according to this continuous transgression that, from the body to the things and from the things to the body, comes about without our being able to identify its origin in a particular place. What he writes on this subject in a passage in *Phenomenology of Perception* is very close to the analyses offered in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, and because it is posited at the end of a gaze or at the conclusion of a sensory exploration that invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention or inversely the accomplishment beyond our perceptual powers and as a coupling of our body with the things.<sup>13</sup>

Here we can see the idea (if not the formula) of the sensible as flesh, the idea of a reversibility of sensing and sensed in which the irreducible difference of the terms and their mutual implication is confirmed. And simultaneously we already hear that these relations cannot be enclosed within definite borders, that there is no domain of perception separated from the domain of knowledge leaving a pathway to be sought from one to the other via some inference, since vision is already of the order of institution, and since it is simultaneously grafted onto the visible that it announces and that shapes its advent or its expression. In a sense, then, the return to the pre-reflective – to the archeologist’s pursuit – does not

aim to lead us to an existential order that would be beneath language and thought, and from where one might see their birth. How could the opening to the world provided by vision – this opening that happens from within the world, denounces its grip and causes it to spring forth as such – how could this be limited to the boundaries of what we call nature? The symbolic dimension is already present with perception, and it is neither more nor less difficult to understand the paradoxes of perception than it is to understand how our speech both says something and yet belongs to a language it does not possess, a language it requires, and how the inscription of my speech within language is confirmed through the impossibility it has of ever being full speech. If we must return to perception, this is not because our relation with the world is defined in perception prior to our speaking or thinking, but because we find embedded in speech or in thought the forgetting of the link to the flesh that always accompanies our faith in the world. To recover the memory of this is simply to acquire the power of interrogating the movement we carry toward being in itself – a movement that we never finish discovering and correcting, since we must undergo it prior to taking it up. Again, as *Phenomenology of Perception* observes, the ideal of objective thought is not foreign to our sensible experience,

[it is] grounded upon my perception of the world as an individual in harmony with itself; and when science attempts to integrate my body into the relations of the objective world, it does so because it attempts, in its own way, to express the suturing of my phenomenal body onto the primordial world.<sup>14</sup>

But it is also true that such a project can never be completed. Although he lands such devastating blows to the image of the *Kosmotheoros* [God's eye view (from nowhere)], although he never ceases to affirm his insertion in the world and the deception of high-altitude thinking [*pensée de survol*], Merleau-Ponty never questions the phenomenologist's position; he works out this position only to establish more securely his right to meet up with the things themselves such as they are given in our experience; he does not wonder how it is that their access is governed by language, or how our installation within language conditions the movement of the description. In this sense, his interrogation never turns back upon itself; it remains unaware of itself in a spectacle of the world at the very moment

in which it challenges this very notion. Such a failure of understanding can be seen (but again, it is he himself who will later teach us this) in his effort to reach a primary truth through the definition of a tacit *cogito*: the silent *cogito* that would provide the sense of the *cogito* in the *Meditations*, but that Descartes fails to see. This tacit *cogito* is to be a *cogito* that is not alien to language, but that is prior to its actual operation, an “I think” buried in the very first perception, a pure “experience from me to myself” where no thought is yet confirmed, where the distinction between the true and the false has not yet appeared, but that sustains our entire human life and announces – beneath all of the modalities of presence and absence to self and to the world – the “indeclinable subjectivity.”

Such a *cogito*, despite the care shown elsewhere to exclude the opposition between lived experience and thought, between perception and expression, reestablishes this very opposition. This tacit *cogito* serves the intention – inherited from the tradition – to tie all of the threads of experience back to the originary point named “consciousness.”

Strange that the effort to wrest vision from the thought about vision culminates in the restoration of an even more definite I, since nothing can happen to it nor happen apart from it that could disturb it. Consider the relation between perception and imperception at this stage of his project: one always implies the other, certainly, but both are modalities of the relation to sense. What escapes me is also what guarantees my power to intend something; or better, the zone of obscurity is instituted by this intending. The surrounding landscape withdraws because the jurisdiction of perception stretches forth – and so one might say in short that I imperceive as much as I perceive. But let us note again, it is strange that the dethroned subject of metaphysics (the legislator, the founder, or the absolute spectator) is reborn in the embodied subject, stripped of the attributes that established his sovereignty, but untouched in his absolute body, indifferent to the division of the certain and the doubtful, or of the real and the imaginary.

We might ask, then, does the desire to establish man’s opening to the world through the eye not govern all of metaphysics? If one stopped at the *Phenomenology of Perception*, one would be tempted to respond that Merleau-Ponty – even better than Husserl – gives metaphysics its completed expression.

But we could only say this by forgetting the interrogation that, in this very work, already overthrows the idea that we adopt of vision, and by

forgetting the beginnings of an interrogation that Merleau-Ponty pursues in his later essays in which he learns to dismantle his own conclusions.

If we turn to these later essays, we will see that they are shaped by the same desire to break out of the framework of a philosophy of consciousness and that this desire does not only have the effect of engendering an extended critique of the claims from which he had still not freed himself, but that it also animates his language, which is demonstrated through his very practice of a new relation to knowledge. This shift should probably be identified first in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence." Here the meditation on expression – which cannot be defined by the relation from the sign to the signified – still presupposes a given language, sets to work from within this language in the way the signs work on each other, is at once an extraction and a creation of sense – the thought of an indirect language that does not lock the signification in the thing said and does not reach the other head-on, but rather causes the reference points of his experience to shift – this meditation is also a return to the self, the use of a speech that does not demonstrate, does not teach, does not emanate from a center; it is a usage that attempts to give interrogation a certain space or to free perception, expression, and history from their usual definition.

Everything that was previously said about the insertion of the subject in a situation, about the double implication of the things in the body and the body in the things, and about the distance of the self from the self and the distance from the self to the world that accompanies perception now acquires another resonance and ceases to be measured against the demands of metaphysics.

This can, in particular, be verified by taking into account the status given, from then on, to the invisible in the ever-renewed analyses of perception. This is not a *de facto* invisible, deduced from our being subjected to the here and the now, nor is it an invisible that would merely be the lining and the reverse side of the visible. Leaving a place for the invisible does not compel one to modify the definition of consciousness; the invisible becomes the structure of the visible, or that which will never appear from any perspective – the pivots, the dimensions, the levels of the field, which are absolutely beyond our grasp; and yet there is no sense in saying that they are concealed from the seer, for they are just as much the inner framework of seeing, and they are no more on the outside than they are on the inside of seeing. This is, in short, a form of writing that

both separates and unites things and the gaze. This invisible is pointed to by what Merleau-Ponty calls “latent being,” or “flesh,” which he claims has no name in a philosophy of consciousness. And if he speaks about the body or about history, it is in order to relate all of the modalities of existence to this texture, which always remains to be deciphered in the effects that confirm it, but which no return to an original experience and no experience of a pure presence could produce. Nor is it an accident if a profound shift in attitude can be sensed in the questions that he puts to psychoanalysis and Marxism during his final years. The unconscious is no longer, as the imperceived was previously, what the self does not know that he knows or sees, nor is the social structure any longer what is inscribed in collective praxis in the world and yet remains unaware of itself; rather, both refer us back to a level of being in us from which we are irremediably excluded.

If it were not in vain to expect a glimmer of light from such simple and well-worn words, if they could merely serve as signs, then we would gladly admit that Merleau-Ponty’s meditation shifts from a question about the subject to a question about being. But again, we must take stock of the implications of such a shift: it is not the substitution of one center of thought for another, but rather a way of abandoning all assurances of any center at all, of taking up interrogation (or as he will call it, the ontological organ) for itself, of wanting to fold interrogation back upon itself in each of its moments, and of agreeing to proceed only according to the effects of its necessity; a consenting to the movement that carries it from one place to another from within the conviction that it is always in a place, within the borders of a flesh or of one of its folds, and not at a distance from every place, whether this is to establish the experience of our inscription, or whether this is to discover a history that does not come from us and yet requires our action.

What is seeing? This question sustains all other questions right to the end, but not because we see before speaking or before thinking. Rather, it is because we have always spoken about this seeing from within the forgetting that we were speaking; because interrogation is supposed to awaken the interrogation that already passes through seeing, causing the eye and the voice to vibrate simultaneously, to welcome the enigma of expression, and finally to learn that there is only an opening through a reopening, and that seeing and knowing harmonize in the limitless movement of desire.

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

**Donald A. Landes**

The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth.

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>

And [all of our teachers] said: man and nature form the object of universal concepts, which was precisely what Merleau-Ponty refused to accept. Tormented by the archaic secrets of his own prehistory, he was infuriated by these well-meaning souls who, taking themselves for small airplanes, indulged in “high-altitude” thinking, and forgot that we are grounded from birth.

– Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>2</sup>

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* belongs on any list of classic texts in twentieth-century philosophy. Presented in 1945 as the major thesis toward his doctorate, this wide-ranging exploration into the nature of perception establishes embodiment at the heart of existential and phenomenological philosophy. By drawing insights from psychological and neurological studies, as well as from classical and contemporaneous philosophical reflections on perception, Merleau-Ponty explores

a series of dimensions of our experience that cannot be separated from our lived embodiment, cannot be accounted for so long as an interpretive distance removes the observer from the spectacle, and cannot be viewed from above through a high-altitude thinking (*pensée de survol*) that forgets the “exceptional relation between the subject and its body and its world.”<sup>3</sup> Starting from the lived experience of one’s own body (*le corps propre*) – the body I live as my own and through which I have a world – this phenomenological account of the ambiguity of our being in the world (*être au monde*) offers a third way between the classical schools of empiricism and idealism, arguing that one’s own body is neither a mere object among objects, *partes extra partes*, nor an object of thought for an ultimately separable and constituting consciousness. “One’s own body,” he writes, “is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it.”<sup>4</sup> As such, Merleau-Ponty will later write, “man is simultaneously subject and object, first person and third person, absolutely free and yet dependent,”<sup>5</sup> and nothing short of “a new genre of reflection”<sup>6</sup> is required to find a solution to the dichotomies of the history of philosophy.

This new genre of reflection is, of course, phenomenology, which for Merleau-Ponty includes all of those pursuits – as diverse as psychology and Marxism – that welcome or nourish the insights of existential analysis. And indeed, the scope of the concepts introduced or incorporated into this ambitious project is remarkable: our being in and toward the world; the role of “motivation” in the phenomenal field; horizon structures in perception and in experience more generally; operative intentionality and the structures of transition or passive synthesis; a phenomenological account of habit, gesture, and sedimentation; the concept of the body schema and its relation to motricity; a non-explicit intentional arc that sees to it that my surroundings have a *sense*; sexuality as a dimension of our experience; a thought *accomplished* in speech; a lived spatiality; a robust intersubjectivity; a tacit *cogito*; an originary temporality and a field of presence; a situated freedom and a sense and direction (*sens*) of history . . . and this list is far from complete. One might be tempted to fill an introduction with definitions or summaries, but as Merleau-Ponty himself once retorted to the request that he summarize his main point: understanding these concepts presupposes “the reading of the book.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, hoping to facilitate the reader’s plunging into the horizons of

*Phenomenology of Perception*, I will here only offer a minimum of introduction by situating *Phenomenology of Perception* within Merleau-Ponty's early philosophical trajectory, providing a brief overview of some of the above concepts in the context of the movement or argument of the text itself, and offering a short discussion of some of the translation decisions of this new translation.

## THE PRIMACY OF PERCEPTION: MERLEAU-PONTY'S EARLY PHILOSOPHICAL TRAJECTORY

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical research begins with the careful study of perception and is guided by the expectation that such a study will dissolve the Cartesian problem of the union of the soul and the body. *Phenomenology of Perception* is – notwithstanding so many other influences and the vast array of problems it proposes to solve – the culmination of a long commitment to these two questions. And yet, given Merleau-Ponty's adherence to phenomenological description, one might ask, following Paul Ricœur: “How could a simple description of seeing, hearing, and sensing carry such philosophical weight?”<sup>8</sup> A brief return to the emergence of his project can provide the beginnings of an answer.

In a 1933 research proposal, Merleau-Ponty tentatively suggests that there may be important philosophical consequences to be discovered in the study of perception in neurology and *Gestaltpsychologie*.<sup>9</sup> In this earliest trace of his project, he already emphasizes the perception of “one's own body” as the enigmatic place where the universe of perception resists being assimilated by the universe of science. After a year of research, Merleau-Ponty is hardly tentative in his application for renewal, writing in 1934 both that the “[p]sychology of perception is loaded with philosophical presuppositions” and that there is a need for a deeper study of Husserl's phenomenological reduction and Gestalt theory's figure-ground structure.<sup>10</sup> His conviction is clear: “phenomenology and the psychology it inspires thus deserve maximum attention in that they can assist us in revising the very notions of consciousness and sensation.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the study of perception points to his second theme – the union of the soul and the body – and one need look no further than the opening lines of Merleau-Ponty's 1936 review of Gabriel Marcel's *Being and Having* to find the connection developed explicitly. Following Marcel, Merleau-Ponty questions the classical relation between a Kantian or

Cartesian consciousness (understood as a “‘power of judging,’ a *Cogito*”) and the meaningless set of sensations delivered up for interpretation by the body, itself understood as a mere physical object among others. Merleau-Ponty embraces Marcel’s claim that “I am my body,” and the rigorous phenomenological exploration of this declaration is one of the key engines of *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s project can be understood as a response to a particularly divisive post-Cartesian intellectual climate at the time of his philosophical formation. As Étienne Bimbenet discusses, the Cartesian tradition’s mind–body dualism had established in France “an essentially problematic field of knowledge,” since any acceptable philosophical anthropology would have to synthesize incompatible sciences: those of the human being’s physical nature and those of our thinking substance.<sup>13</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, the schism is quite a natural one, resulting from “the discordance between the view man might take of himself through reflection or consciousness, and the one he obtains by linking his behaviors to the external conditions upon which they clearly depend.”<sup>14</sup> This discordance becomes radical when each science stakes a claim on the entire field of truth;<sup>15</sup> for Merleau-Ponty the enigma to be explored (but not dissolved) is precisely the fact that “the world and man are accessible to two types of research, one explanatory, and the other reflective.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, this recognition of a dual perspective shapes one of the most prevalent methodological structures framing Merleau-Ponty’s early work, namely, the critical comparison of the shared assumptions of empiricism and intellectualism. Empiricism, for Merleau-Ponty, includes any theory that privileges reductive explanations based upon externally related causes, and thus takes the body as one object among others, as an object *partes extra partes* (parts outside of parts). Intellectualism, on the other hand, encompasses for him any naïvely reflective theory that, although recognizing the importance of internal and meaningful relations, nonetheless privileges the role of consciousness in constituting the unity of objects (including one’s own body) and of experience more generally, substituting for causes an equally “objective” understanding of *reason*. For Merleau-Ponty, this classical dilemma between a “pure exteriority” and a “pure interiority” obscures “the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things.”<sup>17</sup> A simple oscillation or auxiliary connection between these two discordant views being unable to explain our being

in the world, Merleau-Ponty thus establishes the groundwork for a third or middle way. In a passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* that characterizes this style of his early work, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Not wanting to prejudge anything, we will take objective thought literally and not ask it any questions it does not ask itself. If we are led to rediscover experience behind it, this passage will only be motivated by its own difficulties."<sup>18</sup> Each perspective must be pushed to its breaking point in order to reveal "beneath the pure subject and the pure object" a "common ground" or "third dimension where our activity and our passivity, our autonomy and our dependency, would cease to be contradictory." On the one hand, one must "follow the spontaneous development of positive science to see if it truly reduces man to the status of an object," and this is the general project of *The Structure of Behavior*; on the other hand, one must also "re-examine the reflective and philosophical attitude to discover if it truly gives us the right to define ourselves as unconditioned and non-temporal subjects,"<sup>19</sup> which is the guiding problematic of *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's "maximum of attention" to perception leads first to the adoption of an "external perspective," as he traces the emergence of behavior as the appearance in the world of meaningful structures. In other words, the perceiving and behaving body overflows its status as a mere physical object, it is somehow at once both physical and intentional, and the positive sciences of behavior themselves point to the need for a return to experience. He argues that, even at the level of reflex behavior, the organism is not purely passive and the behavior is not merely triggered. The most basic reflexes themselves involve a certain prospective activity and thus express a certain orientation toward the sense of the situation.<sup>21</sup> But limited to the external perspective in order "to understand the relations of consciousness and nature,"<sup>22</sup> the solution cannot follow the temptation to import intellectualist structures into the observed behavior through analogy, for "the intentionality that we discover in the organism is hardly the pure agility of the mind."<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Gestalt theory, meaningful "structures" can be observed and understood, and the notion of structure reveals the emergence in the universe of the "synthesis of matter and idea."<sup>24</sup> In the organism–environment relation and between the levels of behavior themselves (physical, vital, and human), there is a dialectical relation of sense not reducible to its mechanical or causal factors, a whole not reducible to its parts. Life (and consciousness) appear(s) in the world at the moment "a piece of extension [. . .]

turned back upon itself and began to express something, to manifest an interior being externally."<sup>25</sup>

And yet, establishing that consciousness appears in the universe is not enough to establish what consciousness is, leaving the conclusions of the first approach open to the dangers of intellectualist presuppositions regarding the nature of the *cogito*. According to Merleau-Ponty, this first study can do no more than authorize the shift to the second part of his ambitious project, which "alone is capable of fully clarifying the nature of the perceiving subject and of demonstrating the junction between the objective perspective and the reflective perspective that we are seeking."<sup>26</sup>

It would be impossible here to discuss all of the influences that shaped Merleau-Ponty's approach as he turned toward this second step.<sup>27</sup> Given their prominence as targets in *Phenomenology of Perception*, one would have to consider Merleau-Ponty's clandestine attendance of lectures at Lycée Henri IV given by Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), a central figure in an intellectualism named "reflective analysis," followed by his four years of study under Léon Brunschvicg, the preeminent figure in academic (Kantian and Cartesian) philosophy of science. One would also have to unpack Merleau-Ponty's (perhaps cursory) reading of Henri Bergson, his attendance of Alexandre Kojève's influential 1930s lectures on Hegel, his equivocal relation to Christian existentialism (particularly through the work of Gabriel Marcel) and later with another form of existentialism in Sartre and de Beauvoir, his reading of phenomenologist Max Scheler's work on the concept of affective intentionality,<sup>28</sup> and his initial attraction to concepts from Martin Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy. Yet it is perhaps most important to acknowledge Merleau-Ponty's deepening engagement with the late work of Edmund Husserl, particularly in the years following the completion of *The Structure of Behavior*. Indeed, Husserlian phenomenology exercises a particular influence over Merleau-Ponty's argument in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Having attended Husserl's lectures in Paris in 1929<sup>29</sup> and having alluded to some of the central tenets of Husserl's work in his 1934 proposal, Merleau-Ponty was certainly familiar with phenomenology prior to setting to work on *Phenomenology of Perception* after 1938.<sup>30</sup> And yet, as Théodore Geraets observes, this familiarity would significantly deepen thanks to two events in the pivotal year of 1939. First, a special edition of the *Revue internationale de philosophie* was published in honor of Husserl, who

had passed away the previous year, and Merleau-Ponty was particularly struck by two articles from it: Husserl's late fragment on the "Origin of Geometry" and an article written by Eugen Fink on Husserl's late work.<sup>31</sup> Second, in April of 1939 Merleau-Ponty was able to visit the newly established Husserl Archives in Louvain, where he had the opportunity to consult several then unpublished dossiers, including the second volume of *Ideas* and the unpublished parts of Husserl's final work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.<sup>32</sup> This exposure to Husserl's late work – that is, the shift from static and transcendental phenomenology to something of a genetic phenomenology – is clearly influential in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But despite this new immersion in Husserlian phenomenology, World War II and the Occupation prevented Merleau-Ponty from giving these materials the "maximum of attention" he had intended. Indeed, his major thesis provides no direct exegetical study of Husserl's texts and, notwithstanding the Preface (written after the project had been completed), it contains no systematization of phenomenological doctrine. Beginning from a glimpse at the richness of Husserl's late and unpublished work, Merleau-Ponty presents his own study of perception and his own insights into the centrality of embodiment toward an original contribution to the phenomenological tradition. *Phenomenology of Perception* is thus not an examination of the phenomenological tradition's theory of perception; it is a fascinating example of phenomenological reflection at work.

But what is at stake in Merleau-Ponty's defense of "the primacy of perception"?<sup>33</sup> In his 1933 research proposal, he tentatively suggests that his study will "perhaps recast certain psychological and philosophical notions currently in use."<sup>34</sup> By his 1946 presentation of the main themes of his thesis, he has reached the radical position that in fact: "all consciousness is perceptual" and that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value, and all existence."<sup>35</sup> Such a dramatic claim emerges from his attempt to rethink the concepts of perception from the fundamental fact that the perceiving mind is an embodied mind.<sup>36</sup> Our body is our perspective on the world, and the incomplete intentional and horizontal structure of perception is not a limitation to our access to the world and truth; it is the very possibility of this access. The perceiving subject, then, is not detached from the perceived through an interpretive distance, and the object of perception is not the determinate object of science: it is a "totality open to a horizon

of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style.”<sup>37</sup> But this is not to reduce “science, reflection, and philosophy” to sensations. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

By these words, the “primacy of perception,” we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside of all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action.<sup>38</sup>

## PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

Now that the emergence of Merleau-Ponty's research on perception and the place of *Phenomenology of Perception* in his ambitious philosophical project have been established, I will turn to examine how this second step is accomplished. If a philosophical anthropology is precluded by the essentially problematic field of knowledge resulting from the dual perspective one might adopt of a “pure interiority” and a “pure exteriority,” then it is now clear what is at stake when Merleau-Ponty declares that: “Phenomenology's most important accomplishment is, it would seem, to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism through its concept of the world or of rationality.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, any summary or synopsis would necessarily fail to do justice to the richness and scope of Merleau-Ponty's investigation, but the reader may nonetheless find it helpful to have a brief discussion of the major sections and moments of this complex text before plunging into the thickness of the book itself. In addition to the justly famous Preface, the book consists of a long Introduction and three major parts, each divided into several chapters. I turn now to offer a brief and selective glimpse of each of these main divisions, which necessarily involves leaving far too much to the side.

### Preface

Written after the completion of his thesis, Merleau-Ponty's Preface has become a classic text of the phenomenological tradition. It consists of his answer to the fundamental question: “What is phenomenology?” In fact, phenomenology eludes the attempt to assign it a definitive position in the history of philosophy: it examines essences *and* existence, it embraces

transcendence and immanence, it is an “exact science” and yet it takes the “lived” world as its point of departure. Phenomenology, as the return to the things themselves, is precisely the making explicit of our own experience, and so “[w]e will find the unity of phenomenology and its true sense [sens] in ourselves.”<sup>40</sup> The phenomenological reduction brackets our positive knowledge and returns us to a description of lived experience, but we must not assume that this necessitates a withdrawal “from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world.”<sup>41</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, perhaps radically, “[t]he most important lesson of the [phenomenological] reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction,”<sup>42</sup> and “[t]he unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.”<sup>43</sup> Through a discussion of some of the key tenets of phenomenology – the emphasis on *description*, the phenomenological reduction versus transcendental idealism, the role of essences in Husserl, the non-thetic understanding of intentionality, and Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world – Merleau-Ponty prepares the ground for the essentially embodied and perspectival nature of perception and consciousness that *Phenomenology of Perception* invokes to rethink the world and rationality.

### Introduction: Classical Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena

Across four relatively short chapters, this first major division of *Phenomenology of Perception* establishes the shortcomings of classical theories of perception and the necessity of returning to the “phenomenal field.” The argument of the book opens with an analysis of the “seemingly clear and straightforward notion of sensation,” understood to provide the building blocks of our perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty quickly shows that the move to assume the existence of an imperceptible layer of punctual impressions or detachable “qualities” in fact reveals the dominance of an “unquestioned belief in the world.” Rather than examining our perceptual experience, classical empiricism attempts to build perception from what we know about the perceived, and this leads to the “constancy hypothesis,” the belief in a constant connection between points of stimuli on the sensory organs and our elementary perceptions. Gestalt theory, however, has shown that our most basic perceptual experience is not of

an “undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual ‘jolt,’”<sup>44</sup> but is always a figure against a background, always charged with a *sense*, and, unlike the determinate world described by science, perception requires that we “recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon.”<sup>45</sup>

Empiricism may attempt to take account of the apparent discord between the constancy hypothesis and our experience by introducing notions such as association or the projection of memories, yet, “if we hold ourselves to phenomena,” we find the sense of the perceived is not the result of such auxiliary intellectual acts, but emerges from an intuitive response to the solicitation of the spectacle. As I approach an indeterminate spectacle, such as a boat whose mast merges with the forest flanking the beach, a moment will arrive when the mast “locks” to the hull and my gaze gets a “hold” on the scene. This is hardly an experience of a progressive association or interpretation of punctual impressions; rather, “I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as the storm is imminent in the clouds.” From above passive reception, but from below intellectual decision, my gaze discovers the attitude that responds to the “questions that are merely latent in the landscape.”<sup>46</sup>

Turning to intellectualist psychology, Merleau-Ponty again uncovers the unquestioned belief in the world in itself. Accepting the basic tenets of the constancy hypothesis, these psychologists adopt concepts such as “attention” or “judgment” in order to explain how subjective experience might fail to match the predictions of physiological explanations. The mind thus becomes a spotlight, free to turn its attention to the contents of our experience or free to impose a sense by pronouncing a judgment upon the sensory givens, and perception is thus identified with scientific consciousness. Following again Gestalt theory’s critique of the constancy hypothesis, we can see that intellectualism misses attention itself, which is “the primordial operation that impregnates the sensible with a sense,”<sup>47</sup> and fails to recognize that judgment presupposes an already accomplished recognition in the structure of the field of perception itself.

Although Gestalt theory ultimately falls prey to an underlying naturalism, it offers Merleau-Ponty a conceptual tool that helps to make sense of the structuring of the “phenomenal field,” namely, “motivation.” The movements of the body or the apparent sizes of objects do not cause the structures of the visual field, but they motivate them; they are “understood” there. The “phenomenal field” is the place of our “living

communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life.”<sup>48</sup> And since consciousness can “never completely cease being what it is in perception,” the critique of the constancy hypothesis requires nothing short of a new theory of reflection and a “new cogito.”<sup>49</sup> The “fundamental philosophical act would thus be to return to the lived world beneath the objective world.”<sup>50</sup>

## Part One: The Body

If objective thought breaks down when confronted with the phenomenal field, it is nonetheless the intentional structure of perception itself that condemns us to the illusions of objective thought. Indeed, “[o]ur perception ends in objects, and the object, once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it that we have had or that we could have.”<sup>51</sup> Phenomenology may well reveal that perception cannot be limited to its explicit content, that my gaze only presumptively intends the object in its fullness and unity through spatial and temporal horizons, but it cannot stem the tendency of this presumptive synthesis that leads to an absolute positing of the object in itself, the seed that grows into objective thought. And yet there is an object that resists this thrust, opens up the possibility for a new form of reflection, and promises to establish “for-us an in-itself” – this enigmatic object is none other than “one’s own body,” which forever belies the attempt to take it as a mere object in the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional threads that unite it to its surroundings and that, in the end, will reveal to us the perceiving subject as well as the perceived world.”<sup>52</sup>

To begin rethinking embodiment, Merleau-Ponty begins by outlining the shortcomings of mechanistic physiology and classical psychology. Consider, for example, his discussion of phantom limb syndrome, which he argues can be explained by neither a reductive physiological explanation nor an irreducible psychological account, nor even an artificial juxtaposition of the two. For Merleau-Ponty, the phantom limb is the result of a fundamental ambiguity of our being in the world in which our field of experience is structured according to a tacit set of sedimentations and possibilities. As he writes: “To have a phantom limb is to remain open to all of the actions of which the arm alone is capable and to stay within the practical field that one had prior to the mutilation.”<sup>53</sup> My “habitual body”

structures the very appearance of the objects in my world and, from a pre-personal or anonymous level, animates a field of objects that *appear* as manipulable in themselves. After the amputation, objects simply continue to appeal to “a hand that I no longer have.”<sup>54</sup> Now, the psychologist may indeed claim to recognize the special status of one’s own body, identifying for example the body’s peculiar “permanence” in our experience. And yet this *de facto* permanence does not go far enough. If I touch my right hand with my left hand while my right hand is touching an object, there is only one hand, strictly speaking, that *touches*. Always escaping totalization, my body is not merely a permanent object; it is “that by which there are objects” – its permanence is a metaphysical one, not a factual one.<sup>55</sup>

Even if the object is not merely an object in space, it is nonetheless irrecusably *spatial*, and in a long third chapter Merleau-Ponty shifts to consider the relation between spatiality and motricity. More than a mere juxtaposition of parts, “I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a *body schema*.”<sup>56</sup> This non-thetic knowledge of the orientations and powers of my body expresses my manner of being in the world. Merleau-Ponty here introduces Gelb and Goldstein’s patient Schneider to clarify the original intentionality of motricity in normal experience. For normal subjects, a requested “abstract” gesture unfolds in the phenomenal world without having to pass through explicit consciousness, whereas, for Schneider, abstract instructions may well have an “intellectual signification” to guide Schneider’s painstaking reconstruction of a semblance of the requested gesture, but they somehow lack a “*motor signification*, they do not speak to him as a motor subject.”<sup>57</sup> The normal subject sustains the meaningful world thanks to a non-thetic “intentional arc” that “projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation; or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships,”<sup>58</sup> whereas Schneider only engages with things through “a genuine act of interpretation.”<sup>59</sup> Motricity, then, must be seen as an originary intentionality, experienced as an “I can”<sup>60</sup> and closely related to the manner in which habits structure our perceived world by situating us within a new configuration of possible action. By incorporating objects into the body schema, bringing them to this side of any interpretative distance, the body itself carries forward the sedimentation of its past by restructuring the perceived world as soliciting the reconfigured body schema.

If the analysis of motricity and habit reveals a rich understanding of spatiality that emerges through the concrete manner in which the body is in and toward the world, then this analysis already anticipates the “unity” of this lived body. The body’s unity (among its parts or among its regions of experience) is a lived integration in which the parts are understood in relation to the meaningful whole, and in this sense the body’s unity is comparable to the unity of a work of art. The body, then, “is a knot of living significations” and its parts are synthesized not through an intellectual act, but because together they “perform a single gesture.”<sup>61</sup>

Returning to the case of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty considers an existential account of sexuality that is irreducible to the elementary functions of pleasure and pain or the thetic representation of erotic ideas. Schneider’s world, it seems, lacks sexual possibilities; he “can no longer place himself in a sexual situation.” For the normal subject, sexuality is a dimension of experience, such that no act is strictly speaking simply sexual and yet no act is strictly speaking free of the sexual. This existential structure by which the body “expresses” its existence thus leads Merleau-Ponty to begin a reflection on the paradoxical logic of expression. The body expresses sexuality just as “speech expresses thought,” not as an “external accompaniment of it, but because existence accomplishes itself in the body.”<sup>62</sup>

In the final chapter of Part One, Merleau-Ponty turns to speech and expression itself, suggesting that an analysis of speech and the body as expression offers nothing less than the opportunity to “leave behind, once and for all, the classical subject–object dichotomy.”<sup>63</sup> A phenomenological account of language reveals that speech accomplishes thought or, better, that the expressed cannot be separated from its expression. Prior to its expression, thought is nothing but a vaguely sensed direction, and its expression is made possible because I am situated within a linguistic world, just as I am situated within the perceptual world. The words I am about to use “constitute a certain field of action held around me.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, all of these existential modalities (motricity, habit, sexuality, speech) are possible “because the body is a natural power of expression.”<sup>65</sup>

## Part Two: The Perceived World

And yet the world that this body takes up is not itself an object or neutral pole of experience, nor is the ambiguity discovered in one’s own body an

isolated phenomenon – “obscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety.”<sup>66</sup> Discovering the world as perceived is the task of Part Two, and Merleau-Ponty suggests we return “to sensation and examine it closely enough such that it teaches us the living relation of the one who perceives with both his body and his world.”<sup>67</sup> In a rich and lengthy study, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the relation between the perceived world and the perceiving subject is like the relation between a question and its response, or between a solicitation and a gearing into. Consider his description of sensing, now free of the problematic layer of impressions or qualities critiqued above:

Blue is what solicits a certain way of looking from me, it is what allows itself to be palpated by a specific movement of my gaze. It is a certain field or a certain atmosphere offered to the power of my eyes and of my entire body.<sup>68</sup>

Seeing blue involves responding to the spectacle in a certain way, and the world is sustained by our taking it up as our motive, and yet is also the motive for our taking it up:

Thus, a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that *will* provide it with the means to become determinate and to become blue; I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation.<sup>69</sup>

Although this emphasis on response certainly precludes an idle subject, Merleau-Ponty also stresses that perception is not accomplished as athetic or intellectual decision. “Seeing blue” is not something that “I” do; it happens in an anonymous field in which “one” perceives blue or in which *there is* blue. And indeed, “the senses communicate.”<sup>70</sup> Thanks to the existential structure of the field of experience, there is no contradiction in saying that synesthetic perception is not the exception, but is rather the rule.<sup>71</sup>

Even if the “matter of knowledge” provided by sensing is reconceived in this way, might one hope to resist the phenomenological position by retreating to the *a priori* contribution of a Kantian-styled constituting consciousness in terms of a “form of knowledge” structuring this sensing

according to “space”? In the second phase of Part Two, Merleau-Ponty thus offers an analysis of the experience of space that in fact requires not a Kantian synthesis, but “a synthesis of an entirely different type.”<sup>72</sup> Through the study of orientation, depth, and movement, he establishes that the experience of space cannot be captured through the “spatiality of things in space,” nor by a spatiality that results from “a pure activity of connecting.” Rather, “we must seek the originary experience of space prior to the distinction between form and content.”<sup>73</sup> The spatial level that orients my experience is, for instance, a certain way that my body takes up the world, a “gearing of the subject into his world,”<sup>74</sup> and this spatial level is never accomplished by a subject indifferent to space – being is forever “oriented being.”<sup>75</sup> These analyses already point toward the manner in which this experience expresses our being situated in the world, and the fundamental character of lived spatiality can be glimpsed in regions of experience not necessarily predicated upon a world of objects, such as the spatiality of the night, or mythical space.

Space, then, as existentially structured through the gearing of my body to things and to the world, points us to the subsequent chapters, in which Merleau-Ponty examines the appearance of things and others in the natural world and cultural world according to the structure of solicitation and gearing into. Given this essential structure, the real must forever be burdened with anthropological predicates and the natural world itself is not independent of our life: “nature must be our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.”<sup>76</sup> This is why “things” need not be objects; my perceived world embraces all that I must “reckon” with: absences, movements, orientations, others, or even a “friendship” after whose destruction “I am left off-balance.”<sup>77</sup> And beyond things and the natural world, each behavior, habit, or human object “emits an atmosphere of humanity”<sup>78</sup> that is both spatial and temporal. I do not experience others through an analogy, but rather by the fact that my potential action gears into these tools and these landscapes, and this emerges first thanks to the overlapping of embodied perceptual consciousness. The other person’s body is not an object for me; it is a behavior whose sense I understand from within, virtually, allowing for a certain gestural communication through the sedimentations and possibilities of my own body schema. Moreover, when I perceive behavior, the world immediately becomes the world intended by this behavior; it is no longer my world alone. This shared being in the world is the fundamental structure of all communication.

The social world, as a “permanent field or dimension of existence,”<sup>79</sup> reveals the general problem of “transcendence”: “how I can be open to phenomena that transcend me and that, nevertheless, only exist to the extent that I take them up and live them.”<sup>80</sup> There is an “ambiguous life” from which all of the existential transcendences spring, and the attempt to understand the fundamental paradoxes of lived and embodied subjectivity can only be completed if we “uncover time beneath the subject, and if we reconnect the paradox of time to the paradoxes of the body, the world, the thing, and others.”<sup>81</sup>

### Part Three: Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World

As I suggested at the beginning, Merleau-Ponty had long believed that the study of perception would eventually dissolve the Cartesian problem of the union of the soul and the body, and indeed the concluding chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception* set out from a study of the implications the preceding analyses have for the *cogito*, both in terms of Descartes's argument and in terms of “the Cartesian *Cogito*” as a cultural object. Merleau-Ponty writes, “I am thinking of the Cartesian *Cogito*, wanting to finish this work, sensing the coolness of the paper under my hand, and perceiving the trees of the boulevard through the window.”<sup>82</sup> An idea is not a thing; it is a field that includes a depth of latent intentions and sedimentations that immediately orient me and give it its sense. But the type of *cogito* that could take up this thickness is hardly an absolutely free and pure consciousness standing outside of time and destined to consider clear and distinct ideas from the safe dominion of a rigorous solipsism. On the contrary, argues Merleau-Ponty, my perceptual engagement in the real, by means of my embodied and anonymous being in the world, must come before and ground any “doubt” or “certainty” derived from a personal “I think.” My existence is neither transparently self-possessed nor wholly alien to itself. I can read the *Meditations* and understand them because they point me toward this non-transparent *cogito*, but the *cogito* of the *Meditations* remains a second-hand *cogito*, a spoken *cogito* because the language we use interposes between our experience and its expression “the entire thickness of cultural acquisitions.”<sup>83</sup> This tacit *cogito* is an experience of myself by myself and is prior to every philosophy, but it is also, strictly speaking, nothing. It is impersonal and indeclinable; it has but a “fleeting hold upon itself and upon the world.” The “tacit *Cogito* is only a *Cogito*

when it has expressed itself,"<sup>84</sup> and yet its expression never exhausts it, no more than does reflection exhaust the unreflected. The "primordial 'I'" is not wholly unaware of itself in not being wholly transparent to itself, for this would turn it into a mere thing. What is absent is merely the illusory transparency of objective thought. For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is essentially inseparable from its being in the world, which is to say all consciousness is perceptual.

This tacit *cogito*, then, is neither eternal nor absolutely free, and the two essential aspects of this new *cogito* are explored in the final two chapters of the book, namely, temporality and situated freedom. The possibility of the subject being in the world in the manner just described involves a reconsideration of time as the fundamental dimension of my field of presence – I am neither outside of time nor merely subject to it. Drawing on Husserl's understanding of time and Heidegger's concept of transcendence, Merleau-Ponty develops the notions of operative intentionality and passive synthesis by which "[m]y present transcends itself toward an imminent future and a recent past, and touches them there."<sup>85</sup> And indeed freedom too must be understood as a field, and thus as located in existential rather than intellectual decisions. Merleau-Ponty argues that the classical distinction between determinism and absolute freedom fails to capture our conditioned and situated freedom, which is required given our being as the taking up of the past and present toward a future. Our actions, then, certainly give our own lives and history a sense, but this is a sense that precludes our understanding it either as an intellectual imposition of form onto chaos or as the necessary unfolding of a pre-determined logic.

But all of this is simply to evoke some of the themes and ideas of a rich and internally structured text, and the concepts discussed above will have to be considered again in the context in which they emerge in Merleau-Ponty's own presentation below. Moreover, it is worth noting that the limitations of the above discussion required remaining silent on so many other important themes examined by Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception* is indeed a classic text, as in a text that can be returned to again and again, that upon a first reading reveals to us what we had been waiting for, and upon a later reading surprises us with new insights and unexpected reverberations. My hope is that this new translation will encourage this continued reading and this perpetual return.

## NOTES ON THIS TRANSLATION

For readers already familiar with *Phénoménologie de la perception*, the most visually striking aspect of this new translation will be the addition of section titles that do not appear in the body of the text of the original French publication, and this perhaps requires a note of caution. Merleau-Ponty wrote this book in very long paragraphs, some of which run several pages long. Upon publication, he provided an analytical Table of Contents, listing *en bloc* a series of phrases or themes to guide the reader. Although he did not paginate the resulting list of “sections,” the section titles that he established roughly correspond to his paragraph breaks. In the spirit of providing some air to the otherwise intimidating blocks of prose, I have decided – following Rudolf Boehm, the German translator of this book – to insert these section titles into the body of the text. It should, however, be noted that the section titles indicated with an asterisk do not correspond to an original paragraph break. In the same spirit, I have also added some paragraph breaks when a natural pause or textual marker justifies the insertion. Despite the utility of these titles and new paragraph breaks, they do risk disrupting some of the fluid character of Merleau-Ponty’s original prose, and so readers are encouraged to see these titles and breaks as bridges rather than interruptions between Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts.

For the reader interested in Merleau-Ponty’s original French expression, this edition introduces two new components: a bilingual presentation of the full Table of Contents from which the section titles are drawn and the inclusion of the French pagination in the margins. In fact, the section titles contain many of the key concepts essential to any close reading of this text, and through the inclusion of this feature in both French and English the reader is given something of a working glossary of my translation decisions for these key terms. Every effort has been made to translate terms in a consistent manner, or to indicate where the context has required straying from the dominant translation decisions. In terms of the French pagination, a difficult decision had to be made. There are now three editions in French: the original 1945 version (reprinted through 2004); a new version (2005–present) that introduces several small corrections and a new pagination; and finally, the complete text also appears in the 2010 collection, *Œuvres*. The pagination that appears in the margins of this current translation corresponds to the 2005 French edition.

In addition to these components, I have also included a series of translator's endnotes to help explain translation decisions or to provide additional bibliographic information to complete or amend Merleau-Ponty's references. I have made every effort to update Merleau-Ponty's citations, cross-referencing French and German publications with available English translations whenever possible. Apart from minor adjustments, my additions to this text are enclosed within square brackets.

## TRANSLATION DECISIONS

A translation of a text of this size and complexity involves a countless number of translation decisions, and it would be impossible to list all of the important ones here. And yet, in addition to the translator's endnotes and the Bilingual Table of Contents, it may be worth discussing a few of the key decisions.

One of the first motivations for a new translation was the previous translator's non-systematic treatment of Merleau-Ponty's use of *sens* and *signification*. *Sens* is a difficult term to translate, as it means "meaning," "sense," and "direction." Wherever the context has allowed, I have translated it as "sense," which in English preserves the richness of the French term, while reserving "meaning" for Merleau-Ponty's occasional use of the construction *vouloir dire* (to "mean" or, literally, to "want to say"). *Signification* has been rendered as "signification" unless otherwise noted. I have also resisted the previous translator's use of "sense experience" for *le sentir*, opting instead for the more active "sensing." When *sentir* or *se sentir* have been used as verbs, I have chosen "to sense" or "to feel" respectively.

Merleau-Ponty's quasi-technical use of *le corps propre* is as difficult to translate as it is central to the text. The phrase, which literally means "one's own body," has often been interpreted as "the lived body," but an equivalent French term (such as *le corps vécu*) does not appear in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The use of *propre* in the phrase stresses that this body – which Merleau-Ponty contrasts with the body considered as an object in the world among other objects – is my body, the body that is lived as my own. And yet this sense of "own" is not to suggest that *le corps propre* is something I possess as an object that is separable from my being, and Merleau-Ponty devotes considerable time in *Phenomenology of Perception* to demonstrate just this point. Rather than importing an overly interpretive translation, I have followed Merleau-Ponty's style here by using the natural turn of phrase

“one’s own body,” asking the reader to keep in mind the richness of this term and to resist interpreting this “own” as a relation of possession.

Merleau-Ponty makes use of two ways of saying what has been rendered here in English as “experience,” namely, formations using the noun *l’expérience* or phrases around the verb *éprouver* (most commonly *l’épreuve de*). The latter set of terms is often meant in a more passive sense, such as “undergoing” or “suffering,” and I have included the French where this sense might be lost by the more neutral English word “experience.” In a related decision, Merleau-Ponty’s use of the adjective *vécu* (the past-participle adjectival form of the verb *vivre*) has been rendered “lived” or “experienced,” depending on the context. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty indicates that a nuance in *vivre* is made explicit in German with the verbs *leben* and *erleben*.<sup>86</sup>

This relates to a similar difficulty, namely, Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of a Heideggerian formulation in his use of *être au monde*. The original translation of Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein* into French was *être dans le monde*, yet Merleau-Ponty recognized that the French *dans* (“in”) perhaps covered over some of the important richness of Heidegger’s insight. His shift of the phrase to *à* (in the contraction *au*) introduces a rich set of relations, since this preposition can be translated variously as “in,” “to,” “of,” “at,” “toward,” and “belonging to.” For the various occurrences, I have chosen between “being in the world” and “being in and toward the world,” based on context, while occasionally emphasizing the “belonging to” side of the phrase where necessary. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s use of *à* in other contexts is also often impossible to translate; readers are asked to keep in mind the above list of English prepositions when they see such formulations as “presence to,” “being of,” “being at,” and so on.

Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term *le schéma corporel* introduces both historical and conceptual difficulties. The term is drawn from early neurological studies by Head, Lhermitte, and Schilder on the non-thetic postural awareness of the position of one’s own body. Merleau-Ponty specifically rejects the interpretation of *le schéma corporel* as a representation or image, and yet when Schilder himself translates his own German term, *das Körperschema*, into English he writes: “body image.”<sup>87</sup> Rather than following Schilder by writing *image* in French – or rather than adopting Lhermitte’s phrase *l’image de notre corps* (“the image of our body”) – Merleau-Ponty maintains *schéma*. Thus, I have decided to write “body schema” for this term, asking the reader to bear in mind the complex history of this notion in the sciences from which Merleau-Ponty is drawing.

## I TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the discussion of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty makes use of the physiological term *motricité* ["motricity"]. The term indicates motor function, motor activity, and the power or faculty of movement. All of these senses can be found in the English equivalent, "motricity," so I have resisted introducing more common terms (such as motility or motivity), which tend toward over-translation.

Although Merleau-Ponty discusses our being with "others" at length, he does not overly thematize the difficult term *autrui*, which can be translated as "an other," "another person," or "others." I have thus chosen the most natural translation based on context, and only capitalized the term when he does. In addition, the relations between *je*, *moi*, *soi*, and *Égo* are central to various parts of the text, although they are not always rigorously distinguished. I have generally followed "I," "me" or "myself," "self," and "Ego" respectively. This has resulted occasionally in slightly awkward formulations when Merleau-Ponty speaks of a plurality of myselfs (*des moi*), which has been unavoidable given that in these cases he seems intent on distinguishing a personal, empirical myself from a "self" in a more philosophical sense.

Another important decision has been to render Merleau-Ponty's translation of Husserl's concept of *Evidenz* (which he translates into French as *évidence*) by "evidentness." *Évidence* literally means "obviousness" or "obvious fact," and in phenomenology has to do with appearances, not so much with "proof," which is the more common sense of "evidence" in English. To preserve the connection to Husserl and to emphasize the sense of "obviousness," I have chosen to use "evidentness" or "evident facts" whenever possible.<sup>88</sup> It is also worth noting that Merleau-Ponty does not rigorously distinguish between *pouvoir* and *puissance*, and these have been rendered as "power" wherever possible.<sup>89</sup> Finally, I would like to note that I have tried to preserve Merleau-Ponty's punctuation style whenever possible.

## TRANSLATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like first to acknowledge a very sincere debt of gratitude to the *Phenomenology of Perception* "Translation Advisory Board." In deciding to pursue the daunting project of establishing a new translation for a difficult and well-known classic in the history of philosophy, I hoped to find a way of soliciting the help and expertise of members of the community of Merleau-Ponty scholars and translators. I thus formed an advisory board of scholars

from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada, representing a diversity of approaches to Merleau-Ponty's work. These advisors were kind enough to read and respond to detailed newsletters outlining my translation decisions and my approach to the scholarly apparatus, as well as to read and comment upon sample translations. Although there was rarely a consensus among this group on any controversial decision, their contributions to this project were invaluable and have shaped the final version in many ways. In recognition and appreciation of their many contributions, I list them here: Alia Al-Saji, Thomas Baldwin, Renaud Barbaras, Taylor Carman, Edward S. Casey, Françoise Dastur, Sebastian Gardner, Leonard Lawlor, David Morris, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, Hugh J. Silverman, Michael B. Smith, Anthony J. Steinbock, and Forrest Williams. I would also like to recognize the four reviewers of the penultimate draft of this translation: Ronald Bruzina, Taylor Carman, Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, and Anthony J. Steinbock. Their careful reading and insightful comments greatly improved this translation, but of course I am alone responsible for all final decisions and any remaining errors.

Although there is also a long list of others who have offered advice or help along the way, in addition to the above names I would like to mention in particular Galen Johnson, Gail Weiss, and Benjamin Trémoulet, as well as the graduate and undergraduate students from my Philosophy 475 section at McGill University (Winter 2011) who read an abridged draft of this translation. I also thank Tony Bruce and Adam Johnson at Routledge for their assistance (and patience) in this long project, as well as Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly for initiating the project. I would like to express my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their support as well as the French Embassy in Washington, DC for a one-year Bourse Chateaubriand. I would finally like to acknowledge the Philosophy departments at Stony Brook University and McGill University, as well as the generous access granted by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France to their collection.

On a personal note, I sincerely thank my family. This translation would never have been completed without their unwavering support. And finally, my deepest debt of gratitude must be acknowledged to my partner, Kathleen Hulley. Beyond her patience, sacrifice, and moral support, her expertise was invaluable through her several readings of this translation. She is also to be thanked for her contribution to the arduous project of correcting, updating, and cross-referencing Merleau-Ponty's citations.

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## PREFACE

- 7 What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that we must continue to ask this question half a century after Husserl's first works. Nonetheless, it is far from being resolved. Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man<sup>1</sup> and the world is by beginning from their "facticity." Although it is a transcendental philosophy that suspends the affirmations of the natural attitude in order to understand them, it is also a philosophy for which the world is always "already there" prior to reflection – like an inalienable presence – and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order to finally raise it to a philosophical status. It is the goal of a philosophy that aspires to be an "exact science," but it is also an account of "lived" space, "lived" time, and the "lived" world.<sup>2</sup> It is the attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience; and yet in his final works Husserl mentions a "genetic phenomenology,"<sup>3</sup> and even a "constructive phenomenology."<sup>4</sup> Might one hope to remove these contradictions by distinguishing between the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger? But all of *Sein und Zeit*<sup>5</sup> emerges from Husserl's suggestion, and in

the end is nothing more than a making explicit<sup>6</sup> of the “*natürlichen Weltbegriff*” [natural concept of the world]<sup>7</sup> or the “*Lebenswelt*” [life-world]<sup>8</sup> that Husserl, toward the end of his life, presented as the fundamental theme of phenomenology, and so the contradiction reappears in Husserl’s philosophy itself. The hurried reader will give up trying to pin down a doctrine that has said everything and will wonder if a philosophy unable to define itself merits all the commotion made around it and is anything but a myth or a fad.

Even if this were the case, it would remain for us to understand the prestige of this myth and the origin of this fad, and the responsible philosopher will interpret this situation by saying that *phenomenology allows itself to be practiced and recognized as a manner or as a style, or that it exists as a movement, prior to having reached a full philosophical consciousness*. It has been *en route* for a long time, and its disciples find it everywhere, in Hegel and in Kierkegaard of course, but also in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. But a philological commentary on texts would offer nothing, for we only find in texts what we have put into them, and if ever a history has called for our interpretation, it is surely the history of philosophy. We will find the unity of phenomenology and its true sense [*sens*] in ourselves.<sup>9</sup> It is less a question of counting up citations than of determining and expressing this *phenomenology* for us, which has caused – upon their reading of Husserl or Heidegger – many of our contemporaries to have had the feeling much less of encountering a new philosophy than of recognizing what they had been waiting for. Phenomenology is only accessible to a phenomenological method. Thus, let us carefully attempt to tie together the famous phenomenological themes as they are spontaneously tied together in life. Perhaps then we will understand why phenomenology has remained for so long in a nascent state, as a problem and as a promise.<sup>10</sup>

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Phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analyzing. This first rule – to be a “descriptive psychology”<sup>11</sup> or to return “to the things themselves,” which Husserl set for an emerging phenomenology – is first and foremost the disavowal of science. I am not the result or the intertwining of multiple causalities that determine my body or my “psyche”;<sup>12</sup> I cannot think of myself as a part of the world, like the simple

9 object of biology, psychology, and sociology; I cannot enclose myself within the universe of science. Everything that I know about the world, even through science, I know from a perspective that is my own or from an experience of the world without which scientific symbols would be meaningless. The entire universe of science is constructed upon the lived world, and if we wish to think science rigorously, to appreciate precisely its sense and its scope, we must first awaken that experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. Science neither has, nor ever will have the same ontological sense as the perceived world for the simple reason that science is a determination or an explanation of that world. I am not a “living being,” a “man,” nor even a “consciousness,” possessing all of the characteristics that zoology, social anatomy, and inductive psychology acknowledge in these products of nature or history. Rather, I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, nor from my physical and social surroundings; it moves out toward them and sustains them. For I am the one who brings into being for myself – and thus into being in the only sense that the word could have for me – this tradition that I choose to take up or this horizon whose distance from me would collapse were I not there to sustain it with my gaze (since this distance does not belong to the horizon as one of its properties). Scientific perspectives according to which I am a moment of the world are always naïve and hypocritical because they always imply, without mentioning it, that other perspective – the perspective of consciousness – by which a world first arranges itself around me and begins to exist for me. To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always *speaks*, and this world with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive,<sup>13</sup> and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is.

This movement is absolutely distinct from the idealist return to consciousness, and the demand for a pure description excludes the process of reflective analysis just as much as it excludes the process of scientific explanation. Descartes, and above all Kant, *freed* the subject or consciousness by establishing that I could not grasp anything as existing if I did not first experience myself [*m'éprouvais*]<sup>14</sup> as existing in the act of grasping; they revealed consciousness – the absolute certainty of myself for myself<sup>15</sup> – as the condition without which there would be nothing at

all and the act of unifying as the foundation of the unified. Of course, the act of unifying is nothing without the spectacle of the world that it unites. For Kant, the unity of consciousness is precisely contemporary with the unity of the world; and for Descartes, methodical doubt deprives us of nothing, since the entire world – at least insofar as we experience it – is reintegrated into the *Cogito*,<sup>16</sup> sharing in its certainty, and is merely assigned the indication “thought about . . .” [*pensée de . . .*].<sup>17</sup> But the relations between subject and world are not strictly bilateral, for if they were, then for Descartes the certainty of the world would be immediately given along with the certainty of the *Cogito* and Kant could not speak of a “Copernican Revolution.” Beginning from our experience of the world, reflective analysis works back toward the subject as if toward a condition of possibility distinct from our experience and presents universal synthesis as that without which there would be no world. To this extent, reflective analysis ceases to adhere to our experience and substitutes a reconstruction for a description. From this we can understand how Husserl could criticize Kant for a “psychologism of the faculties of the soul,”<sup>18</sup> and oppose to a noetic analysis, which bases the world upon the synthetic activity of the subject, his own “noematic reflection,” which, rather than generating the unity of the object, remains within it and makes its primordial unity explicit.

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The world is there prior to every analysis that I could give of it, and it would be artificial to derive it from a series of syntheses that would first link sensations and then perspectival appearances of the object together, whereas both of these are in fact products of the analysis and must not have existed prior to it. Reflective analysis believes it moves in the reverse direction along the path of a previous constitution and meets up with – in the “inner man,” as Saint Augustine says – a constituting power that it itself has always been. Thus, reflection carries itself along and places itself back within an invulnerable subjectivity, prior to [*en deçà de*]<sup>19</sup> being and time. Yet this is a naïveté, or, if one prefers, an incomplete reflection that loses an awareness of its own beginning. I began to reflect, my reflection is a reflection upon an unreflected;<sup>20</sup> it cannot be unaware of itself as an event; henceforth it appears as a genuine creation, as a change in the structure of consciousness, and yet this involves recognizing, prior to its own operations, the world that is given to the subject because the subject is given to himself. The real is to be described, and neither constructed nor constituted. This means that I cannot assimilate perception to

syntheses that belong to the order of judgment, acts, or predication. At each moment, my perceptual field is filled with reflections, sudden noises, and fleeting tactile impressions that I am unable to link to the perceived context and that, nevertheless, I immediately place in the world without ever confusing them with my daydreams. At each instant, I weave dreams around the things, I imagine objects or people whose presence here is not incompatible with the context, and yet they are not confused with  
 11 the world, they are out in front of the world, on the stage of the imaginary. If the reality of my perception were based solely on the intrinsic coherence of “representations,” then it should always be hesitant, and, delivered over to my probable conjectures, I ought to be continuously dismantling illusory syntheses and reintegrating into the real aberrant phenomena that I may have at first excluded. But this is never the case. The real is a tightly woven fabric; it does not wait for our judgments in order to incorporate the most surprising of phenomena, nor to reject the most convincing of our imaginings. Perception is not a science of the world, nor even an act or a deliberate taking of a stand; it is the background against which all acts stand out and is thus presupposed by them. The world is not an object whose law of constitution I have in my possession; it is the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts and of all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not merely “dwell” in the “inner man”;<sup>21</sup> or rather, there is no “inner man,” man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself.<sup>22</sup> When I return to myself from the dogmatism of common sense or of science, I do not find a source of intrinsic truth, but rather a subject destined to the world.<sup>23</sup>

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From this we can see the true sense of the famous “phenomenological reduction.” There is probably no other question upon which Husserl himself spent more time attempting to come to an understanding, nor one to which he returned more often, since the “problematic of the reduction” occupies a significant place in the unpublished materials.<sup>24</sup> For a long time, and even in his final writings, the reduction is presented as the return to a transcendental consciousness in front of which the world is spread out in an absolute transparency, animated throughout by a series of apperceptions whose reconstitution, beginning from their

results, is the task of the philosopher. Thus, my sensation of red is *appereived* as a manifestation of a certain sensed red, which is in turn sensed as a manifestation of a red surface, which is in turn sensed as the manifestation of a red box, which is, in the end, sensed as a manifestation or as a profile<sup>25</sup> of a red thing, namely, this book. Thus, this would be the apprehension of a certain *hylè* [matter] as signifying a phenomenon of a higher degree, the *Sinn-gebung* [sense-giving],<sup>26</sup> the active signifying operation that might be the definition of consciousness, and the world would be nothing other than the “signification: world.” The phenomenological reduction would thus be idealist, in the sense of a transcendental idealism that treats the world as a unity of value that is not divided between, say, Paul and Pierre; that is, a unity in which their perspectives intersect and that causes “Pierre’s consciousness” and “Paul’s consciousness” to communicate. This is because the perception of the world “by Pierre” is not Pierre’s doing, nor is the perception “by Paul” Paul’s doing; rather, in both cases it is the doing or the work of pre-personal consciousnesses whose communication raises no problems, since this very communication is in fact required by the definition of consciousness, sense, and truth. Insofar as I am conscious, that is, insofar as something has a sense for me, I am neither here nor there, neither Pierre nor Paul; in no way do I distinguish myself from “another” consciousness, since we are all immediate presences in the world, and since this world, being the system of truths, is unique by definition. A consistent transcendental idealism strips the world of its opacity and its transcendence. The world is precisely the one that we represent to ourselves, not insofar as we are men or empirical subjects, but insofar as we are all one single light and insofar as we all participate in the One without dividing it. Reflective analysis is unaware of the problem of others [*autrui*],<sup>27</sup> just as it is unaware of the problem of the world, because from the first flicker of consciousness it grants me the power to go toward a truth that is universal by right, and since the other is himself without *haecceity* [thisness], without place, and without a body, the Alter and the Ego are one and the same in the true world, which is the unifier of minds. There is no difficulty in understanding how “I” can think the Other [*l’Autrui*] because the “I,” and consequently the Other [*l’Autre*], are not trapped in the fabric of phenomena and have a value rather than an existence. Nothing is hidden behind these faces or these gestures, and there are no landscapes that remain inaccessible to me; there is but a touch of shadow that owes its existence to the light.

For Husserl, however, we know that there is indeed a problem of others, and the *alter ego* [the other myself] is a paradox. If another person is truly for-himself, beyond his being for-me, and if we are for-each-other and not separately for-God, then we must appear to each other, we both must have an exterior, and there must be, besides the perspective of the For-Oneself (my view upon myself and the other's view upon himself), also a perspective of the For-Others (my view upon others and the view of others upon me). Of course, these two perspectives cannot be in each of us merely juxtaposed, for then others would not see me and I would not see others. I must be my exterior, and the other's body must be the other person himself. This paradox and this dialectic between the Ego and the Alter are only possible if the Ego and the Alter Ego are defined by their situation and are not set free from all inherence; that is, only if philosophy is not completed with the return to myself, and only if, through reflection, I do not discover merely my presence to myself, but also the possibility of an "outside spectator." Or again, this is possible only if – at the very moment I experience my existence, and even at that extreme point of reflection – I am still lacking the absolute density that would draw me outside of time; and only if I discover in myself a sort of inner weakness that prevents me from being absolutely individual and that exposes me to the gazes of others as one man among men or, at the very least, as one consciousness among consciousnesses. The *Cogito* has, up until our present day, devalued the perception of others; it has taught me that the I is only accessible to itself, since it has defined me through the thought that I have of myself, which I am clearly alone in having, at least in this ultimate sense. In order for the word "other" not to be meaningless, my existence must never reduce itself to the consciousness that I have of existing; it must in fact encompass the consciousness that one might have of it, and so also encompass my embodiment in a nature and at least the possibility of an historical situation. The *Cogito* must find me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity will, as Husserl says,<sup>28</sup> be an intersubjectivity.<sup>29</sup> As a meditating Ego, I can of course distinguish the world and things from myself, since I clearly do not exist in the manner of things. I must even separate myself from my body insofar as it is understood as a thing among things, or as a sum of physico-chemical processes. But even if the *cogitatio* [thinking] that I thus discover has no place in either objective time or objective space, it is not without a place in the phenomenological world. I rediscover the

world – which I had distinguished from myself as a sum of things or of processes tied together through causal relations – “in myself” as the permanent horizon of all of my *cogitationes* [thoughts] and as a dimension in relation to which I never cease situating myself. The true *Cogito* does not define the existence of the subject through the thought that the subject has of existing, does not convert the certainty of the world into a certainty of the thought about the world, and finally, does not replace the world itself with the signification “world.” Rather, it recognizes my thought as an inalienable fact and it eliminates all forms of idealism by revealing me as “being in the world.”

Because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it (or as Husserl often says, to see it *ohne mitzumachen* [without taking part]), or again, to put it out of play. This is not because we renounce the certainties of common sense and of the natural attitude – on the contrary, these are the constant theme of philosophy – but rather because, precisely as the presuppositions of every thought, they are “taken for granted” and they pass by unnoticed, and because we must abstain from them for a moment in order to awaken them and to make them appear. Perhaps the best formulation of the reduction is the one offered by Husserl’s assistant Eugen Fink when he spoke of a “wonder” before the world.<sup>30</sup> Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is conscious of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical. Husserl’s transcendental is not Kant’s, and Husserl criticizes Kantian philosophy for being a “worldly” philosophy because it makes use of our relation to the world, which is the engine of the Transcendental Deduction, and makes the world immanent to the subject, rather than *standing in wonder* before the world and conceiving the subject as a transcendence toward the world. Husserl’s entire misunderstanding with his interpreters, with the existential “dissidents,” and ultimately with himself, comes from the fact that we must – precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world. The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction. This is why Husserl always wonders anew about the possibility

of the reduction. If we were absolute spirit, the reduction would not be problematic. But since, on the contrary, we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture (since they *sich einströmen* [flow along therein], as Husserl says), there is no thought that encompasses all of our thought. Or again, as the unpublished<sup>31</sup> materials say, the philosopher is a perpetual beginner.<sup>32</sup> This means that he accepts nothing as established from what men or scientists believe they know. This also means that philosophy itself must not take itself as established in the truths it has managed to utter, that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning, that it consists entirely in describing this beginning, and finally, that radical reflection is conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation. Far from being, as was believed, the formula for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy: Heidegger's "In-der-Welt-Sein" [being-in-the-world] only appears against the background of the phenomenological reduction.

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Husserl's concept of "essences" becomes muddled through a similar misunderstanding. He declares that every reduction, at the same time as being transcendental, is also necessarily eidetic. In other words, we cannot bring our perception of the world before the philosophical gaze without ceasing to be identical with that thesis about the world or with that interest for the world that defines us, without stepping back to this side of our commitment in order to make it itself appear as a spectacle, or without passing over from the fact of our existence to the nature of our existence, that is, from *Dasein* [existence] to *Wesen* [essence]. But here the essence is clearly not the goal, but rather a means; and our actual commitment in the world is precisely what must be understood and raised to the concept, and this is what polarizes all of our conceptual fixations. The necessity of passing through essences does not signify that philosophy takes them as an object, but rather that our existence is too tightly caught in the world in order to know itself as such at the moment when it is thrown into the world, and that our existence needs the field of ideality in order to know and to conquer its facticity.

The Vienna Circle, as we know, claims categorically that we can only relate to significations. For example, “consciousness” is not, for them, precisely what we are. Rather, it is a recent and complicated signification that we should employ carefully, and only after having made explicit the numerous significations that have contributed to determining it through the course of the word’s semantic evolution. This logical positivism is the antithesis of Husserl’s thought. Whatever shifts of meaning may have ultimately delivered this word and this concept of consciousness to us as a linguistic acquisition, we have a direct means of reaching what it designates: we have the experience of ourselves and of this consciousness that we are. In fact, all the significations of language are measured against this experience and it ensures that language means something for us. “It is the (. . .) still-mute experience that must be brought to the pure expression of its own sense.”<sup>33</sup> Husserl’s essences must bring with them all of the living relations of experience, like the net that draws up both quivering fish and seaweed from the seabed. Thus, we must not follow Jean Wahl in saying that “Husserl separates essences from existence.”<sup>34</sup> Separated essences are the essences of language. It is the very function of language to make essences exist in a separation that is merely apparent, since through language they still rely upon the pre-predicative life of consciousness. What appears in the silence of originary consciousness is not only what these words mean, but also what these things mean, that is, the core of primary signification around which acts of naming and of expression are organized.

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Seeking the essence of consciousness will thus not consist in working out the *Wortbedeutung* [the meaning of the word] consciousness and in fleeing from existence into the universe of things-said; rather, it will be rediscovering that actual presence of myself to myself, the fact of my consciousness which is what the word and concept “consciousness” ultimately mean. Seeking the essence of the world is not to seek what it is as an idea, after having reduced it to a theme of discourse; rather, it is to seek what it in fact is for us, prior to every thematization. Sensualism “reduces” the world by saying that ultimately we have nothing but states of ourselves. Transcendental idealism also “reduces” the world since, even if it makes the world certain, this is only in the name of the thought or the consciousness of the world, and as the mere correlate of our knowledge, such that the world becomes immanent to consciousness and the *aseity* [independent existence] of things is thereby suppressed. On

the contrary, the eidetic reduction is the commitment to make the world appear such as it is prior to every return to ourselves; it is the attempt to match reflection to the unreflective life of consciousness. I aim at and perceive a world. If I were to follow sensualism in saying that there is nothing here but “states of consciousness,” and if I sought to distinguish my perceptions from my dreams through some set of “criteria,” then I would miss the phenomenon of the world. For if I am able to speak about “dreams” and “reality,” to wonder about the distinction between the imaginary and the real, and to throw the “real” into doubt, this is because I have in fact drawn this distinction prior to the analysis, because I have an experience of the real as well as one of the imaginary. The problem, then, is not to attempt to understand how critical thought can give itself secondary equivalents to this distinction; the problem is to make explicit our primordial knowledge of the “real” and to describe the perception of the world as what establishes, once and for all, our idea of the truth. Thus, we must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather, we

17 must say: the world is what we perceive.

More generally, we must not wonder if our evident truths [*nos évidences*] are really truths, or if, by some defect of our mind, what is evident for us would actually be revealed as illusory when measured against some truth in itself. For if we speak of illusion, this is because we have previously recognized illusions, and we could only do so in the name of some perception that, at that very moment, vouched for itself as true, such that doubt, or the fear of being mistaken, simultaneously affirms our power of unmasking error and could thus not uproot us from the truth. We are in the truth, and evidentness is “the experience of truth.”<sup>35</sup> To seek the essence of perception is not to declare that perception is presumed to be true, but rather that perception is defined as our access to the truth. If I now wanted to follow idealism in basing this actual evidentness, this irresistible belief, upon an absolute evidentness, that is, upon the absolute clarity of my thoughts for myself; or, if I wanted to uncover in myself a creative thought [*une pensée naturante*] that would establish the framework of the world or illuminate it throughout, then I would again be unfaithful to my experience of the world. I would, then, be seeking what makes this world possible rather than seeking what this world actually is. The evidentness of perception is neither adequate thought nor apodictic evidentness.<sup>36</sup> The world is not what I think, but what I live [*ce que je vis*]; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not

possess it, it is inexhaustible. I can never fully justify the permanent thesis of my life that “there is a world,” or rather, “there is the world.” This facticity of the world is what establishes the *Weltlichkeit der Welt* [worldliness of the world],<sup>37</sup> what makes it such that the world is a world, just as the facticity of the *cogito* is not an imperfection in it, but rather what assures me of my existence. The eidetic method is that of a phenomenological positivism grounding the possible upon the real.

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We can now approach the question of intentionality, too often cited as the principal discovery of phenomenology, even though intentionality can only be understood through the reduction. There is hardly anything new in the claim that “all consciousness is consciousness of something.” In his “Refutation of Idealism,” Kant showed that inner perception is impossible without external perception, that the world as the connection of phenomena is anticipated in the consciousness of my own unity, and is the means I have of coming into being as consciousness.<sup>38</sup> What distinguishes intentionality from the Kantian relation to a possible object is that the unity of the world, prior to being posited by knowledge through an explicit act of identification, is lived as already accomplished or as already there. In the *Critique of Judgment*,<sup>39</sup> Kant himself demonstrated that there is a unity of the imagination and of the understanding, and a unity of subjects prior to the object, and that, in an experience of beauty, for example, I undergo the experience of a harmony between the sensible and the concept, between myself and another, which is itself without any concept. Here the subject is no longer the universal thinker of a system of rigorously connected objects, no longer the subject who is, if he is to be able to [*pouvoir*] form a world, the positing power [*puissance*]<sup>40</sup> that imposes the law of the understanding upon the manifold; rather, he discovers himself and appreciates himself as a nature spontaneously conforming to the law of the understanding. But if the subject has a nature, then the hidden art<sup>41</sup> of the imagination must condition the categorial activity; it is no longer merely aesthetic judgment that rests upon this hidden art, but also knowledge, and this art also grounds the unity of consciousness and of consciousnesses.

Husserl takes up the *Critique of Judgment* when he speaks of a teleology of consciousness. This is not to double human consciousness with

an absolute thought that would assign consciousness its ends from the outside. Rather, it is to recognize consciousness itself as a project of the world,<sup>42</sup> as destined to a world that it neither encompasses nor possesses, but toward which it never ceases to be directed – and to recognize the world as that pre-objective individual whose imperious unity prescribes knowledge its goal. This is why Husserl distinguishes between act intentionality – which is the intentionality of our judgments and of our voluntary decisions (and is the only intentionality discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) – and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*),<sup>43</sup> the intentionality that establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life, the intentionality that appears in our desires, our evaluations, and our landscape more clearly than it does in objective knowledge. Operative intentionality is the one that provides the text that our various forms of knowledge attempt to translate into precise language. The relation to the world, such as it tirelessly announces itself within us, is not something that analysis might clarify: philosophy can simply place it before our eyes and invite us to take notice.

19 Through this enlarged notion of intentionality, phenomenological “understanding” is distinguished from classical “intellection,” which is limited to considering “true and immutable natures,”<sup>44</sup> and so phenomenology can become a phenomenology of genesis. Whether it is a question of a perceived thing, an historical event, or a doctrine, “to understand” is to grasp the total intention – not merely what these things are for representation, namely, the “properties” of the perceived thing, the myriad of “historical events,” and the “ideas” introduced by the doctrine – but rather the unique manner of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax, in all of the events of a revolution, and in all of the thoughts of a philosopher. For each civilization, it is a question of uncovering the Idea in the Hegelian sense, not something like a physico-mathematical law, accessible to objective thought, but rather the unique formula of behavior toward others, Nature, time, and death; that is, a certain manner of articulating the world that the historian must be able to take up and adopt. These are the *dimensions* of history. And in relation to them, there is not a single word or human gesture – not even those habitual or distracted ones – that does not have a signification. I believed I was keeping quiet due to fatigue, or some politician believed he had merely uttered a platitude, and just like that

my silence or his utterance take on a sense, because my weariness or his recourse to some ready-made formula are not accidental; they express a certain disinterest and thus are still a certain taking up of a position with regard to the situation.

If we examine an event up close, then everything appears to happen by accident at the moment it is lived: that person's ambition, some lucky encounter, or some isolated circumstance seems to have been decisive. But accidents cancel each other out, and that is how this myriad of facts comes together and sketches out a certain manner of taking a position toward the human condition, or an event whose contours are definite and of which one can speak. Must history be understood through ideology, through politics, through religion, or through the economy? Must we understand a doctrine through its manifest content or through the psychology of the author and the events of his life? We must in fact understand in all of these ways at once; everything has a sense, and we uncover the same ontological structure beneath all of these relations. All of these views are true, so long as they are not isolated, so long as we go right to the very foundation of history, and so long as we meet up with the existential core of signification that is made explicit in each of these perspectives. As Marx said, history does not walk on its head; but neither does it think with its feet. Or better, it is not for us to worry about either its "head" or its "feet," but rather its body. All economical and psychological explanations of a doctrine are true, since the thinker only ever thinks beginning from what he is. Reflection upon a doctrine will itself only be complete when it succeeds in connecting with the history of the doctrine and with external explanations, and in putting the causes and the sense of a doctrine back into an existential structure. There is, says Husserl, a "genesis of sense" (*Sinn-genesis*)<sup>45</sup> that alone teaches us, in the final analysis, what the doctrine "means" [*veut dire*]. Like understanding, critique too will have to be pursued on all levels. And of course, the identification of some accident in an author's life can hardly be satisfactory as a refutation of a doctrine: for the doctrine signifies beyond this life; and there are no pure accidents in existence or in coexistence, since both assimilate accidents in order to construct reason from them. And finally, since it is indivisible in the present, history is also indivisible in succession. In relation to its fundamental dimensions, all periods of history appear as manifestations of a single existence or as episodes of a single drama – but we do not know if this drama will have an ending. Because we are in the

world, we are *condemned to sense*,<sup>46</sup> and there is nothing we can do or say that does not acquire a name in history.

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Phenomenology's most important accomplishment is, it would seem, to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism through its concept of the world or of rationality. Rationality fits precisely to the experiences in which it is revealed. There is rationality – that is, perspectives intersect, perceptions confirm each other, and a sense appears. But this sense must not be separated, transformed into an absolute Spirit, or transformed into a world in the realist sense. The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other.<sup>47</sup> The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [la reprise] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own. For the first time, the philosopher's meditation is lucid enough to avoid endowing its own products with a concrete reality in the world that is prior to that meditation. The philosopher attempts to think the world, others, and himself, and to conceive of their relations. But the meditating Ego and the "disinterested onlooker" (*uninteressierter Zuschauer*)<sup>48</sup> do not meet up with an already given rationality; rather, they "establish each other"<sup>49</sup> and establish rationality

21 through an initiative that has no ontological guarantee, and whose justification rests entirely upon the actual power that it gives us for taking up our history.

The phenomenological world is not the making explicit of a prior being, but rather the founding of being; philosophy is not the reflection of a prior truth, but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth. One might ask how this actualization is possible and if it does not in fact link up, in the things, with a preexisting Reason. But the only *Logos* that preexists is the world itself, and the philosophy that brings the world to a manifest existence does not begin by first being possible: it is present or real, just like the world of which it is a part, and no explanatory hypothesis is more clear than the very act by which we take up this incomplete

world in order to attempt to totalize it and to think it. Rationality is not a problem; there is no unknown behind it that we would have to determine deductively or prove inductively beginning from it. We witness, at each moment, this marvel that is the connection of experiences, and no one knows how it is accomplished better than we do, since we are this very knot of relations.<sup>50</sup> The world and reason are not problems; and though we might call them mysterious, this mystery is essential to them, there can be no question of dissolving it through some “solution,” it is beneath the level of solutions.<sup>51</sup> True philosophy entails learning to see the world anew, and in this sense, an historical account might signify the world with as much “depth” as a philosophical treatise. We take our fate into our own hands and through reflection we become responsible for our own history, but this responsibility also comes from a decision to which we commit our lives; and in both cases it is a violent act whose truth is confirmed through its being performed.

As the disclosure of the world, phenomenology rests upon itself, or rather, founds itself.<sup>52</sup> All forms of knowledge are supported by a “ground” of postulations, and ultimately upon our communication with the world as the first establishing of rationality. Philosophy, as radical reflection, abstains in principle from this resource. Since philosophy is itself within history, it too draws upon the world and upon constituted reason. Thus, it will be necessary that philosophy direct toward itself the very same interrogation that it directs toward all forms of knowledge. It will thus be indefinitely doubled; it will be, as Husserl says, an infinite dialogue or meditation, and, to the very extent that it remains loyal to its intention, it will never know just where it is going. The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.<sup>53</sup> If phenomenology was a movement prior to having been a doctrine or a system, this is neither accidental nor a deception. Phenomenology is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry, or Cézanne – through the same kind of attention and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to grasp the sense of the world or of history in its nascent state. As such, phenomenology merges with the effort of modern thought.



# **Introduction**

Classical Prejudices  
and the Return to  
Phenomena





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## “SENSATION”

In beginning the study of perception, we find in language the seemingly clear and straightforward notion of sensation: I sense red or blue, hot or cold. We will see, however, that this is the most confused notion there is, and that, for having accepted it, classical analyses have missed the phenomenon of perception. 25

[a. *Sensation as impression.*]<sup>1</sup>

I might first understand sensation to be the manner in which I am affected and the undergoing [l'expérience] of a state of myself. Perhaps the gray that immediately envelops me when I close my eyes or the sounds that vibrate “in my head” when I am half-asleep indicate what pure sensing might be. I would sense precisely insofar as I coincide with the sensed, insofar as this latter ceases to have a place in the objective world, and insofar as it signifies nothing to me. This is to acknowledge that sensation must be sought beneath all qualitative content, since in order to be distinguished as two colors, red and green – even if lacking a precise location – must already form some scene before me and thus cease to be part of myself. Pure sensation will be the undergoing of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual “jolt.” Since these authors readily concede the point, it is unnecessary to show that this notion corresponds to

nothing in our experience, and that for animals such as the chimpanzee or the chicken, the most simple *factual perceptions* that we know have to do with relationships and not with absolute terms.<sup>2</sup> But we must still wonder why they believe themselves authorized by *right* to mark off a layer of “impressions” in perceptual experience.

26 Consider a white patch against a homogeneous background. All points on the patch have a certain common “function” that makes them into a “figure.” The figure’s color is denser and somehow more resistant than the background’s color. The borders of the white patch “belong” to the patch and, despite being contiguous with it, do not join with the background. The patch seems to be placed upon the background and does not interrupt it. Each part announces more than it contains, and thus this elementary perception is already charged with a *sense*. The objection will be raised that if the figure and the background are not sensed as a whole, then they must surely be sensed in each of their points. This would be to forget that each point in turn can only be perceived as a figure on a background. When Gestalt theory tells us that a figure against a background is the most basic sensible given we can have, this is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception that would, in an ideal analysis, leave us free to introduce the notion of impression. Rather, this is the very definition of the perceptual phenomenon, or that without which a phenomenon cannot be called perception. The perceptual “something” is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a “field.” A truly homogeneous area, offering *nothing to perceive*, cannot be given to *any perception*. The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what it is to perceive. Pure impression is thus not merely undiscoverable, but imperceptible, and therefore is inconceivable as a moment of perception. If it is introduced, this is because, rather than being attentive to perceptual experience, this experience is neglected in favor of the perceived object. A visual field is not made up of isolated visions. But the viewed object is made up of material fragments, and spatial points are external to each other. An isolated perceptual given is inconceivable, so long as we perform the mental experiment of trying to perceive it. Yet in the world there are isolated objects or a physical void.

[b. Sensation as quality.]

I will thus give up the attempt to define sensation as pure impression. But to see is to have colors or lights, to hear is to have sounds, to sense is

to have qualities; is it not sufficient to have seen red or to have heard an A in order to know what sensing is? Red and green are not sensations, they are the sensibles, and quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object. Rather than providing a simple means of delimiting sensations, the quality, if we consider it in the very experience in which it is revealed, is just as rich and obscure as the object or as the entire perceptual spectacle. The red patch I see on the rug is only red if the shadow that lies across it is taken into account; its quality only appears in relation to the play of light, and thus only as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover, the color is only determinate if it spreads across a certain surface; a surface too small would be unqualifiable. Finally, this red would literally not be the same if it were not the “wooly red” of a carpet.<sup>3</sup> Analysis thus discovers the significations that reside in each quality. Might the objection be raised that only the qualities of our actual experience are at issue here, overlaid with an entire body of knowledge, and that we still have the right to conceive of a “pure quality” that might define “pure sensing”? And yet, as we have just seen, this pure sensing would amount to not sensing anything and thus to not sensing at all. The supposed evidence of sensing is not grounded upon the testimony of consciousness, but rather upon the unquestioned belief in the world [*le préjugé du monde*].<sup>4</sup> We believe we know perfectly well what it is “to see,” “to hear,” or “to sense,” because perception has long given us colored or sonorous objects. When we want to analyze perception, we transport these objects into consciousness. We commit what psychologists call “the experience error,”<sup>5</sup> that is, we immediately assume that what we know to exist among things is also in our consciousness of them. We build perception out of the perceived. And since the perceived is obviously only accessible through perception, in the end we understand neither.

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We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in detaching ourselves from it in order to shift to the consciousness of the world. If we were to do so, we would see that the quality is never directly experienced and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. This “something,” moreover, is not necessarily an identifiable object. There are two ways of being mistaken regarding quality: the first is to turn it into an element of consciousness when it is in fact an object for consciousness, to treat it as a mute impression when it in fact always has a sense; the second is to believe that this sense and this object, at the level of quality, are full and determinate. And this second error, just like the first, results from

the unquestioned belief in the world. Through optics and geometry we construct the fragment of the world whose image can, at any moment, form upon our retina. Anything outside of this perimeter – not reflecting upon any sensitive surface – no more acts upon our vision than does light falling upon our closed eyes. We ought to thus perceive a sharply delimited segment of the world, surrounded by a black zone, filled with qualities without any lacunae, and subtended by determinate size relations like those existing upon the retina. But experience offers nothing of the sort, and we will never understand what a visual field is by beginning from the world. Even if it is possible to trace a perimeter around vision by beginning at the center and gradually approaching lateral stimuli, the results of such a measurement nonetheless vary from one moment to the next, and the precise moment at which a previously seen stimulus ceases to be seen can never be identified. The region surrounding the visual field is not easy to describe, but it is certainly neither black nor gray. In this region there is an *indeterminate vision*, a vision of *something or other*, and, if taken to the extreme, that which is behind my back is not without visual presence. The two straight lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion (see Figure 1) are neither equal nor unequal, this is only an essential alternative in the objective world.<sup>6</sup> The visual field is this strange milieu in which contradictory notions intertwine because the objects (the straight lines of Müller-Lyer's illusion) are not here placed in the domain of being where a comparison would be possible, but are rather each grasped in its own private context, as if they did not belong to the same universe.

Psychologists have for a long time gone to great lengths to ignore these phenomena. In the world taken in itself, everything is determinate. There are of course confused spectacles, such as a landscape in the fog, but even so, one still admits that no real landscape is in itself confused – it is only confused for us. Psychologists will contend that the object is

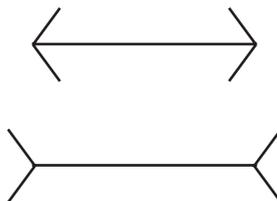


Figure 1

never ambiguous, that it only becomes so through inattention. The limits of the visual field are not themselves variable, and there is an absolute moment in which the approaching object objectively begins to be seen; quite simply, we fail to “notice.”<sup>7</sup> But the notion of attention, as we will show more fully below, has for itself no evidence from consciousness. It is but an auxiliary hypothesis concocted to preserve the unquestioned belief in the objective world. We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon. Quality appears within this atmosphere. The sense that it contains is an equivocal sense, and more a question of an expressive value than a logical signification. The determinate quality by which empiricism wanted to define sensation is an object for, not an element of consciousness, and it is the recently introduced object of scientific consciousness. For these two reasons, the notion of quality conceals rather than reveals subjectivity. 29

[c. *Sensation as the immediate consequence of a stimulation.*]

The two definitions of sensation that we have just tried out were in fact direct definitions in appearance only. As we have just seen, they were modeled upon the perceived object. They were thereby in agreement with common sense, which also defines the sensible through the objective conditions on which it depends. The visible is what we grasp with our eyes; the sensible is what we grasp *through* our senses. Let us follow the idea of sensation on this terrain<sup>8</sup> and see what becomes of this “through,” this “with,” and the notion of sense organs at the first level of reflection, namely, at the level of science. Although we have no experience of sensation, do we at least find some reasons in its causes and in its objective genesis to maintain it as an explanatory concept? Physiology, to which the psychologist turns as if to a higher authority, is in the same predicament as psychology. It too begins by situating its object in the world and by treating it as a fragment of extension. They lose sight of *behavior* by focusing on the reflex, that is, the elaboration and the formulation of stimuli; behavior is hidden by a longitudinal theory of nervous functioning that makes each element of the reaction correspond in principle to an element of the situation.<sup>9</sup> As in reflex-arc theory, the physiology of perception begins by assuming an anatomical trajectory that leads from a determinate *receiver* through a definite *transmitter* to a recording post,<sup>10</sup> which is itself specialized. The objective world being given, it is 30

assumed that the world confides messages to the sense organs that thus must be carried, then decoded in such a way as to reproduce in us the original text. From this it follows that there is, in principle, a point-by-point correspondence and a constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception. But this “constancy hypothesis”<sup>11</sup> enters into conflict with the givens of consciousness, and the same psychologists who posit it also acknowledge its theoretical character.<sup>12</sup>

For example, the intensity of a sound is made to lose its pitch under certain conditions; the addition of auxiliary lines renders two objectively equal shapes unequal;<sup>13</sup> and a colored area appears uniformly colored even though the chromatic thresholds of the different regions of the retina ought to make it red here and orange there, and in certain cases even achromatic.<sup>14</sup> Should these cases in which the phenomenon does not adhere to the stimulus be kept within the frame of the law of constancy through additional factors – attention and judgment – or should the law itself be rejected? When red and green presented together give a resulting gray, it is conceded that the central combination of stimuli may immediately give rise to a sensation different from what the objective stimuli would require. When the apparent size of an object varies with its apparent distance, or when its apparent color varies with the memories that we have of it, it is conceded that “sensorial processes are not impervious to central influences.”<sup>15</sup> In this case, then, the “sensible” can no longer be defined as the immediate effect of an external stimulus. Is not the same conclusion applicable to the first three examples that we cited? If attention, more precise instructions, rest, and extended practice finally bring perception into conformity with the law of constancy, this does  
 31 not prove its general validity, for, in the examples cited, the first appearance had just as much of a sensorial character as the results obtained in the end. The question is whether the attentive perception, the concentration of a subject on a point in the visual field (such as the “analytical perception” of the two principal lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion), rather than revealing “normal sensation,” does not substitute an exceptional arrangement for the original phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> The law of constancy cannot, against the evidence of consciousness, make use of a single critical experiment in which it itself is not already implied, and it is already presupposed wherever it is believed to be established.<sup>17</sup>

If we return to phenomena, they show us that the apprehension of a quality – exactly like the apprehension of size – is tied to an entire

perceptual context, and the stimuli no longer give us the indirect means that we sought for delimiting a layer of direct impressions. But not only does the physical stimulus elude us when we seek an “objective” definition of sensation. The sensory apparatus itself, as modern physiology imagines it, is no longer appropriate to the role of “transmitter” that it was made to play by classical science. Non-cortical lesions on tactile organs certainly dilute the concentration of points sensitive to hot, to cold, or to pressure, and also diminish the sensitivity of the points that remain. But if an extended enough stimulation is applied to the damaged organ, detailed sensations reappear; a more energetic exploration by the hand compensates for the increased threshold.<sup>18</sup> At the elementary level of sensibility, we catch sight of a collaboration among partial stimuli and between the sensorial system and the motor system that, through a variable physiological constellation, keeps the sensation constant, and thus rules out any definition of the nervous process as the simple transmission of a given message. The destruction of the visual function, regardless of the location of the lesions, abides by the same law: at first, all colors are affected<sup>19</sup> and lose their saturation. Next the spectrum becomes simplified, being reduced to four colors and shortly thereafter to two. In the end, a gray monochrome is reached, without the pathological color for that matter ever being equated with any normal color at all. Thus, in central lesions just as in peripheral ones, “the loss of nervous substance results not merely in a deficiency of certain qualities, but rather in the transition to a less differentiated and more primitive structure.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, normal functioning must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not copied, but constituted. And if we try to grasp “sensation” from the perspective of its preparatory bodily phenomena, we do not discover a psychical individual, a function of certain known variables, but rather a formation already tied to an ensemble and already endowed with a sense, which is only different in degree from more complex perceptions and which thus does not move us forward in our delimitation of the pure sensible.

32

There is no physiological definition of sensation and, more generally, there is no autonomous physiological psychology because the physiological event itself obeys biological and psychological laws. It was long believed that peripheral conditioning provided a reliable way of identifying the “elementary” mental functions and of distinguishing them from the “higher-level” functions less strictly tied to the bodily infrastructure.

A more precise analysis discovers that the two types of functions intertwine. The elementary is no longer that which, when added together, will constitute the whole, nor is it a mere occasion for the whole to constitute itself. The elementary event is already invested with a sense, and the higher-level function will only achieve a more integrated mode of existence or a more valuable adaptation by utilizing and by sublimating the subordinate operations. Reciprocally, “sensory experience is a vital process, as much as procreation, breathing, or growth.”<sup>21</sup> Psychology and physiology are thus no longer two parallel sciences, but rather two characterizations of behavior, the first concrete and the second abstract.<sup>22</sup>

- 33 When the psychologist asks the physiologist to provide a definition of sensation “through its causes,” we said that he rediscovers on this terrain his own problems, and now we see why. For his part, the physiologist must rid himself of the realist prejudice that all of the sciences borrow from common sense and that hinders them in their development. The change in the sense of the words “elementary” and “higher-level” in modern physiology announces a change in philosophy.<sup>23</sup> The scientist must also learn to offer a critique of the idea of an external world in itself, since the facts themselves suggest to him that he must give up the idea of the body as a transmitter of messages. We grasp the sensible with the senses, but we know now that this “with” is not merely instrumental, that the sensory apparatus is not a conductor, and that even at the periphery, the physiological impression is engaged in relations that were previously considered to be central.

[d. *What is sensing?*]

Once again, reflection – even the second-order reflection of science – obscures what was believed clear. We thought we knew what sensing, seeing, and hearing are, but now these words pose problems. We are led back to the very experiences that these words designate in order to define them anew. The classical notion of sensation was not itself a concept derived from reflection, but rather a recently developed product of thought turned toward objects; it was the final term in the representation of the world, the furthest removed from the constitutive source, and thereby the least clear. In its general effort toward objectification, science inevitably comes to a conception of the human organism as a physical system in the presence of stimuli themselves defined by their

physico-chemical properties, seeks to reconstruct actual perception<sup>24</sup> upon this basis and to close the cycle of scientific knowledge by discovering the laws according to which knowledge itself is produced, that is, by establishing an objective science of subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> It is, however, also inevitable that this attempt should fail. If we think back to the objective investigations themselves, we discover first that the exterior conditions of the sensory field do not determine it part for part and only intervene by making an autochthonous organization possible – this is what Gestalt theory shows – and second, that structure in the organism depends on variables such as the biological *sense* of the situation, which are no longer physical variables, such that the whole escapes the well-known instruments of physico-mathematical analysis to open onto another type of intelligibility.<sup>26</sup>

34

If we now turn back, as is done here, toward perceptual experience, we observe that science only succeeds in constructing a semblance of subjectivity: it introduces sensations, as things, precisely where experience shows there to already be meaningful wholes; it imposes categories upon the phenomenal universe that only make sense within the scientific universe. Science requires that two perceived lines, like two real lines, be either equal or unequal, and that a perceived crystal have a determinate number of sides,<sup>27</sup> without noticing that the nature of the perceived is to tolerate ambiguity, a certain “shifting” or “haziness” [*bougé*],<sup>28</sup> and to allow itself to be shaped by the context. The lines in Müller-Lyer’s illusion cease to be equal without thereby becoming “unequal” – they become “different.” That is, an isolated objective line and the same line considered in a figure cease to be, for perception, “the same.” The line is only identifiable in these two functions by an analytical perception that is not natural. Likewise, the perceived is composed of lacunae that are not merely “non-perceptions.” I can know that a crystal that I see or touch has a “uniform” shape without having, even tacitly, counted its sides. I can become familiar with a person’s face without ever having perceived, for itself, the color of the eyes. The theory of sensation, which composes all knowledge out of determinate qualities, constructs objects for us that are cleansed of all equivocation, that are pure, absolute, and that are the ideal of knowledge rather than its actual themes. This theory only works for the recently developed superstructure of consciousness. This is where “the idea of sensation is more or less fulfilled.”<sup>29</sup> The images that instinct projects before itself, the images that tradition recreates in each

generation, or even mere dreams, appear at first as if on equal footing with  
35 perceptions properly so called, and true, actual, and explicit perception is  
gradually distinguished from phantasms through a work of critique. The  
word “perception” indicates a *direction* more than a primitive function.<sup>30</sup>  
We know that the constancy of the apparent size of objects for variable  
distances, or the constancy of their color in different lightings, is more  
perfect in children than in adults.<sup>31</sup> That is, perception is more strictly  
tied to the local stimulus in its mature state than in its early state, and it  
conforms to the theory of sensation more for the adult than it does for  
the child. Perception is like a net whose knots progressively appear more  
clearly.<sup>32</sup> A depiction of “primitive thought” has been given that can only  
be understood if we relate the responses of primitive people, their utter-  
ances, and the sociologist’s interpretations back to the fund of perceptual  
experience that they all attempt to express.<sup>33</sup> What prevents spatial, tem-  
poral, and numerical wholes from being articulated in manipulable, dis-  
tinct, and identifiable terms is sometimes the adherence of the perceived  
to its context and as if to its viscosity, and sometimes the presence in the  
perceived of a positive indeterminacy. We must explore this pre-objective  
domain within ourselves if we wish to understand sensing.

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