The Phenomenology of Perception: An Explication of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Major Work

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The Phenomenology of Perception:
An explication of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s major work

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Table of Contents

Introduction.............................................................................................................i

Classical Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena
Preface....................................................................................................................1
Sensation as a Unit of Experience.................................................................11
Association and the Projection of Memories.................................................15
Attention and Judgment..............................................................................19
The Phenomenal Field....................................................................................27

Experience and Objective Thought: The Problem of the Body
Experience and Objective Thought. The Problem of the Body..........33
The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology.................................37
The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology.........................44
The Spatiality of the Body and Motility......................................................47
The Synthesis of One's Own Body...............................................................57
The Body in its Sexual Being......................................................................58
The Body as Expression and Speech.........................................................65

The Theory of the Body is Already a Theory of Perception
Sense Experience.........................................................................................75

Conclusion and Philosophical Implications............................................88
Extended Bibliography..............................................................................
Introduction

To many, Merleau-Ponty's fundamental discovery, and self-proclaimed victory over Cartesian dualism, was the body-subject. It may be somewhat of a stretch to label Merleau-Ponty's achievement a "discovery," as the philosopher himself admits that the same "attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world" that characterizes phenomenology, was just as present in the works of Balzac, Proust, and Cezanne. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's radical reflection hinges on the body-subject and its relationship to the phenomenal world. To understand Merleau-Ponty's unique approach to perception one must therefore begin with a firm understanding of the body-subject.

As the term implies, the body-subject is the unity of a subjective consciousness or spirit, and a body. Accordingly, the body-subject transcends the opposition of body and spirit and attempts to express the aspects of our existence in a single reality, which is at the same time both material and spiritual.

For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, the body is subject and subjectivity is fundamentally characterized by the body's dialectic relationship to its surroundings from which all meaning is born. Merleau-Ponty's dialectic is differentiated from causal processes, the latter of which presupposes a reality distinct from a subject, but which literally causes the subject to behave and think in a certain way. Merleau-Ponty's dialectic, on the other hand, places the subject in a larger gestalt, a whole of meanings that is constituted by the subject, but which simultaneously motivates the subject to exist as a unique, temporal individual.

In short Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology undertakes the task of describing the body as subject, the body as meaning giving existence, by virtue of certain bodily phenomena that have the character of neither a reality existing independently from us, nor a reality constructed by an act of intellectual consciousness. The phenomena in reference that are more thoroughly delineated in this paper include the spatiality of the body, which is brought to being
through movement, the body in its sexual being, the body as expression, and the body as sense experience.

Concerning the spatiality of the body and motility, it was once thought that we were in possession of a mental images that defined our spatial experience through a compendium of the various body parts. In this way if I moved my arm, my body image would be disrupted, and I would know through conscious effort each and every position my arm occupied while in motion. But what of pathologies such as the phantom limb and anosognosia, asks Merleau-Ponty? How could an intellectually produced body image include a limb that was not actually there? Likewise, how could a limb that was actually present be omitted from a bodily schema? In reply to this Merleau-Ponty speaks of body image as a power of projection that involves a pre-reflective orientation and motility wherein I am immediately aware of the position of my body as it projects itself towards the world and its tasks. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the experience of the body as a motor intentionality that allows me to structure my world in accordance with my personal life.

The situation with the body as sexual being is similar, although obviously more intimate and conceivably more obvious. Simply put reality for us sometimes has a very sexual meaning: all bodies do not have the same sexual significance despite having roughly the same physiological make-up. But significance again does not find its origin on the conscious level: one does not have to be Christian to realize that temptation often does not originate on the level of conscious thought. Most importantly, it is through sexuality that we are first alerted to bodily existence as transcendence. For Merleau-Ponty this means that the body-subject involves a coming to being of significances (sexual in this case) that already always point beyond themselves.

Likewise with sensation, we find that our primordial connection with the world is through the pre-conscious structure of the body. I cannot help it that the grass is green, but it would just as mistaken to think that the greenness of the grass existed independently of me. It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of sensation as a building block for perception by
rejecting the constancy hypothesis, but describes a primary layer of sensing which is anterior to our thoughts, unified in space, diverse but interconnected, and involved in a dialectical relation to the world. We can say metaphorically that we, as body-subject, are a multi-faceted question which the world responds to in various ways: the world responds with flavor in answer to our sense of taste and smell, the world replies in sounds to our power of hearing, and so on.

The body as expression and speech is a crucial concept in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology because if he doesn't prove that thought originates from a bodily existence, we are again trapped with a notional consciousness that evokes traditional mind/body dichotomies. To remain true to his fundamental thesis therefore, Merleau-Ponty simply states that the word has meaning, and thought lies contained in speech.

At first one might be inclined to envision speech as the external coating of some internal truth. But is this notion tenable? If words were merely external signs how would communication be possible? How could I read a book and understand Merleau-Ponty's thought unless his thought were actually present in the words on the page. Speech is like any other form of bodily expression--be it dancing or painting--in that its meaning finds existence in the medium of expression.

The reason that we harbor the illusion that speech is divorcible from thought stems from the fact that speech, once originated, can be repeated endlessly. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the speaking word and the spoken word: the former is the truly original expression that brings to light something completely new, while the latter, once created, becomes a common possession for everyone. The really signifying word, which is replete with emotion--the speaking word--makes a thought present which in turn is completely dependent on (made up of) the words that went into its making. Thought is thus not independent of speech; on the contrary thought is accomplished through speaking.

Through these characteristics, Merleau-Ponty is able to successfully show the unique, pre-reflective, meaning giving
existence that defines us in the form of a body subject. Through his radical reflection, which places in abeyance all the abstractions and categories that have muddled our actual experience, Merleau-Ponty redisCOVERS the primacy of perception, and the fundamental connection we have with the world from which all second-order, or conscious, experiences are then possible.
Preface

Perhaps the best place to start a discussion on Merleau-Ponty would be with the question that the philosopher poses himself at the very beginning of the preface to The Phenomenology of Perception: What is phenomenology? In immediate response Merleau-Ponty comments that it seems strange that such a question would still be asked, being that Husserl first wrestled with the concept over fifty years before. But, according to Merleau-Ponty, the question has never been answered satisfactorily. His preface to the Phenomenology therefore serves as a creative interpretation of the phenomenological movement and remain among the very best pages ever to have been written about the subject. In order then to comprehend fully what Merleau-Ponty wants us to derive from his phenomenology we need to come to terms with his conceptualization of perception, his descriptive methodology, his understanding of the Cogito, his critique of Descartes and Kant, his unique reduction, being-in-the-world, his view of history and the world—in other words his entire philosophy. Thus a firm comprehension of his preface will serve as a stable beginning to an understanding of his philosophy as a larger whole.

"Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences," (vii) Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion of phenomenological methodology. "But," he adds "phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'." This latter statement is very significant for a number of reasons: for one, it sets the tone for Merleau-Ponty's descriptive approach to experience (as opposed to an analytical approach), it begins to outline his concrete methodology (the import of someone's 'facticity'), and it alludes to the dialogue within which a body-subject must exist in order to gain understanding of the world.
A good part of the impetus behind Merleau-Ponty's descriptive phenomenology seems to come from his critique, and ultimate rejection, of Descartes and Kant. Descartes of course gave us the dualism between mind and body which has dominated so much of philosophical thinking in the last centuries. In dividing the mind and body as he did, Descartes detached the subject or consciousness from the rest of the body by claiming that I, as observer, could not apprehend anything unless I first experienced myself in the act of apprehension. Similarly Kant proposed an analytic reflection that threw experience into the realm of the ideal, where it was incumbent upon the subject to synthesize the world on the basis of higher mental structures. If the subject didn't do this, according to Kant, there would be no world. Merleau-Ponty strongly rejects both of these hypotheses on the grounds that "the act of relating is nothing if divorced from the spectacle of the world" (ix). He goes on to state that "the world is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality" (x). We here begin to see Merleau-Ponty's notion that the world and consciousness are inextricably joined into one. Philosophies that subsequently remove the subject from the world are rendered nonsensical in Merleau-Ponty's eyes.

What Merleau-Ponty is professing here is "a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude" (vii). In other words, Merleau-Ponty is calling for a direct description of our experience—a suspension of predicated beliefs and a return to a 'direct and primitive contact' with the world as we experience it. Merleau-Ponty describes his own phenomenology in this sense as trying "to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the
sociologist may be able to provide" (vii). Therefore the necessary accompaniment of the move towards a direct describing of experience, is the move away from causal thought. Science can no longer be satisfied with the symbols and language of causal thought as primordial, or fundamental. Before the knowledge of science, or math or physiology is a more basic experience that I know from my own particular point of view, without which the explanations of science would be meaningless: "I am not the outcome of the meeting point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up" (viii). In this sense the real is not something that is constructed, or formed in our minds, but rather an experience that can only be described: the real is not caused, it is experienced.

Throughout Merleau-Ponty's text we can see a certain respect for, and influence attributable to, the Gestalt psychologists. Borrowing from these psychologists, Merleau-Ponty readily admits that "a figure on a background is the simplest sense-given available to us" (4). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has been called a Gestalt philosophy because of its affinity to this type of thought. What Merleau-Ponty criticizes about Gestalt psychology, however, is its presupposition of an objective world that can be separated from us and studied. The 'world' in Merleau-Ponty's context is analogous to the 'structure' of the Gestaltist's language, in that it is from these primordial totalities that all meaning is subsequently derived--but we cannot separate our existence from this world. We then, as body-subject are a part of this world; in essence we are destined to this world that forms a structure around us while simultaneously including us. "The real is a closely woven fabric," (x) Merleau-Ponty says, metaphorically elaborating on our real existence with the world and with others as a structure of inter-connectedness. Consciousness is thus seen as an awareness of the many relations we have with the world. There isn't a reality outside of us, and correspondingly an 'inner person' inside of us (to use
Saint Augustine's terminology), or an active meaning-giving consciousness that is characterized by an absolute truth that is able to analyze and connect together the discreet experiences that we have. If this were the case, if we did accept an analytical reduction or Kant's notion of a transcendental consciousness we would encounter vast unexplainable difficulties in our own experience of the phenomenal world. For to a consciousness that transcends the world, the world must be completely transparent (xi), in other words completely definable. Furthermore my consciousness and my neighbor's consciousness would necessarily be a part of a greater unity, a larger truth, according to the tenets of analytical reflection which accepts implicitly that myself and other people are "equally without thisness, location or body" (x). As Merleau-Ponty says "analytical reflection knows nothing of the problem of other minds, or of that of the world, because it insists that with the first glimmer of consciousness there appears in me theoretically the power of reaching some universal truth "(xii). Humans are in the world, humans are of the world, and only in the world do they know themselves. This is a very important theme for Merleau-Ponty, and one to which he continually goes back: how does the individual relate to, or is related to, the world and other subjects. As a transparent consciousness is necessarily trapped within a mechanistic body and therefore unknowable, Merleau-Ponty's rejection of analytic thought sets the stage for a return not only to things themselves, but the return to an intersubjective experience of other people who are living expressions of bodily being.

An important part of the preface of the *Phenomenology* is Merleau-Ponty's description of Husserl's reduction, and Merleau-Ponty's placing of his own unique reduction in context with his predecessor's. According to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's fundamental reduction is contingent on the belief that we cannot exist completely in ourselves. "For the 'other' to be more than an empty word, it is necessary that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing, but
that it should take in also the awareness that one may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation" (xiii). We see that besides the perspective of the for-oneself (my view of myself, and the other's view of his/her self), there has to be the perspective of the for-others (which is my view of the other, and their view of me). Comprehension is therefore of a dialectical nature, in that we cannot look at things in the world as existing for themselves as if completely isolated from everything and everyone. Our bodily, re-reflective presence is a manifold question which the world responds to in manifold ways. Beings exist in the world at all times in a perpetual inherence, and cannot escape this destiny by means of analysis, of transcendence, or reflection. Quite the contrary "at the very moment when I experience my existence--at the ultimate extremity of reflection--I fall short of the ultimate density which would place me outside time, and...I discover within myself a kind of internal weakness standing in the way of my being totally individualized" (xii). In light of this, where the Cogito, literally the "I think" in Descartes' terms, taught us that the I is accessible only to itself, Merleau-Ponty maintains that the Cogito reveals us always entwined in a certain situation, in which we are constantly relating to others and to the world. "The true Cogito does not define the subject's existence in terms of the thought he has of existing...on the contrary it recognizes my thought itself as an inalienable fact, and does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as being-in-the-world" (xiii). For Merleau-Ponty the phrase "I think, therefore I am" is misguided and should read "I am in-the-world, therefore I think."

To continue on with his description of the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty quotes Husserl as saying "Every reduction, as well as being transcendent, is necessarily eidetic" (xiv). "Eidetic" in this sense comes from the Greek eidos, which when translated means "essence." Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this notion by stating that looking
for essences means looking for what something actually is for us, before and thematization. It is our de facto, and "effective involvement in the world (that) is precisely what has to be understood and made amenable to conceptualization" (xiv). The complete discovery of essences is thus not the goal of a reduction according to Merleau-Ponty, nor even possible for that matter; quite the contrary a philosophy needs an ideal (a la 'essences') that acquaints us with our existence which is "too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such" (xv).

Merleau-Ponty alludes here to his phenomenology of language and meaning in speech, although a later chapter investigates the subject far more thoroughly. However, we do discover his future intentions when he explains that "we have the experience of ourselves, of that consciousness which we are, and it is on the basis of this experience that all linguistic connotations are assessed, and precisely through it that language comes to have any meaning at all for us" (xv). Hence consciousness, of which language is comprised, is directly accessible to us: "in the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape" (xv). According to Merleau-Ponty there is thought in speech, and speech in thought, and neither is separable from meaning. However, language can be a deceptive tool, for as we find later in the book, there can be a distinct line drawn between primordial speech, and speech that exists in consciousness but does not signify a fundamental experience.

Accordingly, the essence of consciousness must not be sought in the realm of things already said. The discovery of true consciousness "will consist in rediscovering my actual presence to myself, the fact of my consciousness which is in the last resort what the word and the concept of consciousness mean" (xv). We can only find the world's essence by looking at what it is in fact for us, before it has been thematized. Assertions and discourse must be placed in abeyance that
hinder us from experiencing the world on a primordial level. The world is right there in front of us, it is what we are open to, it is what we are in communication with, it is what we perceive. Our perception of the world is not something that we suppose to be true, but rather something that is defined as access to the truth. The 'truth' that Merleau-Ponty speaks of is not of course a self-evident truth in the Platonic sense of the term. For if we tried to embody this truth, if we tried to illuminate the world as a truth we would be "looking for what makes that experience possible instead of looking for what it is" (xvi). The truth that Merleau-Ponty speaks of is not an idealistic truth, or one that we fathom in our imaginations; it is instead inherent in the facticity of the world, and our irreducible union with that situation.

If 'all consciousness is consciousness of something', as Merleau-Ponty states, then what is the force that continually propels this consciousness in the first place? Kant tried to show through his analysis that we, as subjects had a certain relation to a possible object: the world, constructed of various phenomena "is anticipated in the consciousness of my unity, and is the means whereby I come into being as a consciousness" (xvii). The problem with this theory, as far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, is that the world is there before any possible interpretation of mine. The world has already been lived in, it is "ready-made" so to speak by the time I enter it with a full consciousness. If we adhered to Kant's notion therefore, it would necessarily mean that we presumably created our world as we went along, always discovering something that wasn't there before. Merleau-Ponty rejects this view in favor of the phenomenological theory of intentionality which, according to Husserl "is a question of recognizing consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which it neither embraces nor possesses, but towards which it is perpetually directed" (xvii). It is through this intentionality (and the distinction is clearly made between phenomenological intentionality and 'the conscious
intentionality of act' in the sense of 'intending to do something') that we find the "unity of the world and of our life" (xviii); it is that which produces our desires, our judgments, our viewpoint, it is that which produces the "text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language" (xviii). Seen in this light, we cannot analyze this relationship we have with the world any further than that which we see as expressed through our intentionality.

A concept that needs clarification is that which Merleau-Ponty speaks of as the 'pre-conscious,' or 'pre-reflective state,' as in "radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on pre-reflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all" (xiv). Initially it must be noted that Merleau-Ponty rejects consciousness in strict Cartesian terms. For Descartes consciousness was separable from the body; it was something that had control over the body, it was the hub of existence, the only realm of thought. This is a distinction that Merleau-Ponty is not willing to make. For Merleau-Ponty, the terms body and subject have no meaning on their own. There is no subject within a body, a ghost in the machine. There is simply a unified 'I', a body-subject as Merleau-Ponty says later in the book. "I am, not a 'living creature' nor even a man, nor again even 'a consciousness," (viii) Merleau-Ponty explains. These are merely terms that serve to separate the body and the subject, which in reality is a phenomenological whole. "I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them" (ix). Everything we presently experience is tied up in our present consciousness, which consistently interacts with our world, and with our antecedents. At the same time though, returning to the original discussion, there is a deeper level of consciousness, one that always eludes our grasp, but nonetheless one that is in constant conversation with us. This 'preconscious' should not be looked at as exactly analogous to the psychoanalytic model
of the unconscious, although the two seem to have some commonalities. In his chapter on the body as a sexual being, Merleau-Ponty specifically addresses the difference between the two, and in the end he explains his rejection of theories of the unconscious. We will discuss his reasons for rejection when we undertake the task of discussing that chapter (Cf. p. 52), but suffice it to say here that rather than believing that 'unconscious' motives are the underlying structure of existence, "ambiguity is of the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings" (169). Merleau-Ponty doesn't accept that there could be a conscious somewhere that dictated our actions, but was always distanced from us. The 'preconscious' is rather implicit in our actions, words, perceptions, and evaluations, but never in the realm of the unambiguous, and also never in the visible spectrum of our conscious existence. For example, when I go to the gym with friends to play basketball, it is merely a process of putting on my shoes and playing. If I wanted to sit back and delineate the actual playing method while I tried to play, however, there would be an entirely different situation. I would have to figure out the trajectory and arc of the ball so that it would successfully go in the basket, I would have to constantly make a mental note of how fast people were moving so I could pass the ball efficiently, and so on. In sum, my body can do things without me ever 'knowing' why, and possibly without ever being able to explain that phenomenon. That is the 'pre-conscious' of which Merleau-Ponty speaks in his theory. It is an implicit, though meaningful "knowledge" that is forever implicit in our existence.

Merleau-Ponty's final introduction in the preface of the Phenomenology is to his understanding of history, its dialogue with the present, and its union with meaning. Merleau-Ponty begins his historical description by paraphrasing Marx as saying "It is true...that history does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet. Or one should say rather that it is neither its 'head' not its 'feet' that we have
to worry about, but its body" (xix). In other words, history is not comprised of independent, extraneous instances. It is a whole body inseparable from its 'feet' or 'head' much the same way that our own bodies cannot be compartmentalized. This is so because, as Merleau-Ponty continually reiterates, everything has meaning, every instance of history included. "There is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning" (xviii). Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a parishioner whose weariness, coupled with the minister's cliched phrases signify the taking up of a certain position in relation to a specific situation. The parishioner's fatigue, and the minister's resting on platitudes might seem just a chance occurrence, but really these are expressions that outline a definite event which has a definite meaning. If one is looking at some historical doctrine in criticism (to use another of Merleau-Ponty's examples), it will never be sufficient to relate the particular critique "to some accidental event in the author's life" (xix). One must make a full account of the author's "psychological make-up and biography," otherwise a conceptualization of history will remain superficial. An understanding of history must be pursued at all levels (from an ideological level, a political level, an economic level, religious, etc.) simultaneously, as the levels only when together form a structure of dialogues, a meaningful whole.

If we then return to our, and Merleau-Ponty's original question of "What is phenomenology," does it appear that we have some insight to the correct answer? "Yes and no" would seem to be the appropriate response. "Yes" because we can now proceed with the knowledge that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is one of description, rather than one of explaining or analyzing. We can now come to terms with Merleau-Ponty's reduction that takes us from the realm of ideas and describes our existence as a web of relationships, or dialogues with the world, with other body-subjects, with the past and the future. We can now begin to understand why
Merleau-Ponty admired Eugen Fink so, for he described the role of a philosophical reduction as follows: "Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical" (xiii). We can begin to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by 'pre-conscious', or that unexplainable ambiguity which continually manifests itself in our thoughts, actions, and way of understanding the world. On the other hand, we can never fully understand a phenomenology because it is essentially an infinite dialogue that never fully knows where it is going, and can never look back as having been completed. The structure of society and the relations between people in the world will reveal a certain intention at a certain time, but this instance will only serve to blend into history as a whole, as a process of continual flux. "The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason" (xxi). With this we can proceed to Merleau-Ponty's critique of empiricism and rationalism, as well as a deeper description of his own philosophy.

'Sensation' as a Unit of Experience

Before Merleau-Ponty begins expressly to describe his own theory, he undertakes a critique of those philosophies that preceded his own, namely that of empiricism, and rationalism. This critique comes in the form of a rather long introduction that includes the concepts of sensation, association and the projection of memories, attention and judgment, and finally a summary of the major points of his critique of traditional
philosophies along with a preview of the rest of the book by way of an explanation of the phenomenal field.

Merleau-Ponty states immediately in his critique of 'sensation as a unit of experience' that we find in the language of perception the "notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious" (3). When for example, we see red, or blue, the accepted wisdom has demanded that we admit having had sensations of redness, or of blueness. Merleau-Ponty states in regard to this way of thinking that "nothing could be more confused, and that because they accepted it readily, traditional analysis missed the phenomenon of perception" (3). In other words there is a clear distinction between sensation and perception; the two are not synonymous, as has had been used in the prior thoughts of traditional analysis.

We might in the first place be tempted to say that sensation comes to the body in the form of dot-like impressions that are easily distinguishable, and instantaneous. As Merleau-Ponty says "I might be said to have sense-experience precisely to the extent that I coincide with the sensed, that the latter ceases to have any place in the objective world, and that it signifies nothing for me" (3). If we accepted this experience of sensation, we would be adhering to a strictly analytic viewpoint that places consciousness in the role of interpreter, and concrete objects in the realm of ideas. The seeing of colors for example, would necessitate my possessing 'red,' and 'blue' in some "picture before me," as Merleau-Ponty says, or some cognitive image within my mind. But "this notion corresponds to nothing in our experience," (3) the truth being that our perceptions are contingent not upon any absolute terms, but rather upon the relationships existing in a certain 'field' that is laid out in front of us. Merleau-Ponty often refers to this 'field' in which all perception is experienced. In the preface he stated that "[m]y field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colors, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world" (x).
To a great extent Merleau-Ponty is again drawing from the Gestalt psychologists who gave us the figure-ground distinction as the basic unit of all perception, when he speaks of a perceptual 'field.' According to Gestalt theory, the figure-ground distinction exists in that the visual world consists of objects that protrude from a background or general horizon. We find that not only does Merleau-Ponty seem to draw from this theoretically when he speaks of a 'field,' he goes so far as to say the figure-ground distinction is "the very definition of the phenomenon of perception, without which a phenomenon cannot be said to be perception at all" (4). What we take from this is the notion that whatever it is that is being perceived, it is always in the middle of something else, it is always a part of a larger form or structure. In fact, if something doesn't exist in a 'field,' where structures can be identified, that 'something' cannot lay claim to being a perception at all. As Merleau-Ponty states, "A really homogenous area offering nothing to be cannot be given to any perception " (4). In light of this we see that the 'pure impression' that we spoke of earlier is "not only indiscernable but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception" (4). Since 'red' and 'blue' as empirical categories are hence not phenomenologically perceived, we can no longer speak of impressions as indicative of a primordial sense-experience.

It is here that Merleau-Ponty begins a steady criticism of the theory that there is an 'objective world' somewhere outside us where everything taken in itself is determined. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, objective thought is a 'prejudice' that we harbor which tells us that "we know perfectly well what 'seeing', 'hearing', 'sensing' are, because perception has long provided us with objects which are colored or which emit sounds" (5). In other words 'qualities' like 'red', and 'grating' are properties of the object, and it is an "analysis (which)...discovers in each quality meanings which reside in it" (5). However, Merleau-Ponty points out that when we analyze objects, or presumably qualities of objects, "we transpose the
objects into consciousness," (5) and as was described in the preface, consciousness is not separable form the world. "We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world" (5). Reiterating his thesis that consciousness and the world are joined as one, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to forewarn us about the two ways of being mistaken about quality, and our conceptualization of meaning (5). He says "one (mistake) is to make it (quality) into an element of consciousness, when in fact it is an object for consciousness, to treat it as an incommunicable impression, whereas it always has meaning; the other is to think that this meaning and this object, at the level of quality, are fully developed and determinate." Two conclusions can be drawn from these statements: one is that, as we said before, consciousness and the world are interconnected; the other is that although meaning resides in an object, this meaning is not fully determined unless it arises from the dialectic relationship with a body-subject.

Merleau-Ponty's general criticism thus far speaks directly to those theories that held sensation as the fundamental building-block for perception. As he has shown, these theories have lead us on a path that posits sensation as either an 'impression'--in the sense that to see red is to have the impression of redness--or a 'dot like impact', an instantaneous, undifferentiated effect that places quality in the subjective property of the object, thus rendering our experience of that quality indistinguishable, and devoid of meaning. But as Merleau-Ponty has shown, such a notion is absurd if the figure-background structure is the simplest sense-given experience perceivable by us, and if our experience, no matter how elementary, is always charged with meaning.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to show however, that an equally grave mistake is to think of perception in the light of what mechanistic physiology (and also common sense) has tried to elucidate. For "physiology, to which the psychologist turns as to a higher court of appeal, is in the same predicament as
psychology. It too first situates its objects in the world and treats it as a bit of extension" (7). To this extent the physiology of perception uses a model of the reflex arc theory, which sees a simple stimulus--impression--perception sequence existing in the human subject. "Hence we have a point by point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception" (7). But as Merleau-ponty shows, this causal form of thinking, this adhering to a 'constancy hypothesis' is foreign to the actual experience we have of perception. Variations in the pitch and tone of a sound, the illusion that equidistant lines are unequal when presented in a certain situation (as in the Muller-Lyer optical illusion), and the gray resulting when red and green are presented together are all examples Merleau-Ponty uses to show just this point. Furthermore, the ambiguity of our perception in these cases is not a product of our lack of attention, as psychologists have tried to argue. "There are many unclear sights, as for example a landscape on a misty day, but then we always say that no real landscape is in itself unclear"(6); at least that is what objective thought presupposes. Contrarily Merleau-Ponty gives credence to the indeterminate, and ambiguous as a 'positive phenomenon', which is always part of a context, or a field, and which gives rise to the experience of perception of something. According to Merleau-Ponty we must abandon the notion of an external world existing in itself as a stimulus which through a series of impressions produces the phenomenon of perception. For us to understand perception, we must reflect back onto the pre-objective realm.

'Association' and the 'Projection of Memories'

Continuing on with his critique of traditional analyses that hold sensation as the building blocks of perception, Merleau-Ponty in his chapter on 'association' and the 'projection of memories' specifically challenges the empiricist notion that the aforementioned concepts are what supplies
meaning to perception. In the previous chapter it was evident that Merleau-Ponty wanted to point out the problems encountered by those who rely on sensation when analyzing perception. "Already a 'figure' on a background contains, as we have seen, much more than the qualities presented at a given time. It has an 'outline', which does not 'belong' to the background and which 'stands out' from it" (13). This fundamental fact in itself proves the classical definition of sensation obsolete, for if the outline that Merleau-Ponty spoke of were merely another sensation, it could not be an outline. We would have to speak of the outline as a collection, or summation of points that form a line, but have no real internal and meaningful connection themselves. Merleau-Ponty realizes, however, that the different parts of a certain whole all possess a 'particular significance' which cannot be understood once 'sensation is introduced as an element of knowledge'. That a quality, say a patch of red, should signify something in the empirical sense for example, doesn't mean that the red is "this warm color which I feel and live in and lose myself in," (13) but rather it "announces something that it does not include, it exercises a cognitive function, " (13) it appeals to my memory in order to apply a meaning to a sensory given devoid of meaning. Taken in this context, 'red' is no longer there in front of me, but rather merely a 'representation' that my mind has somehow created. Empiricism relies on the assumption that we recognize this particular distribution of sensations as something we have seen in the past, and are given to recalling memories in the form of our learned terminology in order to comprehend our present perception. But this isn't accurate, as Merleau-Ponty recognizes, because "once consciousness has been defined as sensation, every mode of consciousness will have to derive its clarity from sensation" (15). If this were the case, in order to understand the word circle for example, I would have to have the same sensation I had of it the first time I experienced the word. Every time I encountered a circle, I would need before me the memory of a 'certain de facto
arrangement' of my sensations as they experienced a circle for the first time. "For if a thing perceived were made up of sensations and memories, it would depend for its precise identification on the contribution of memories, and would have in itself nothing capable of stemming the flood of the latter, with the result that (the thing perceived) would be...intangible, elusive, and always bordering on illusion" (21).

This notion of the 'association of ideas' just described, which brings past experience into the present "can restore only extrinsic connections, and be no more than one itself" (14). But, as Merleau-Ponty describes, the parts of a thing are not merely bound together by an external association. If we are to understand perception, we must start from the basic grouping, or structure which presents itself before us, which we find ourselves immersed in, and which we can reflect upon and describe. Looking at individual stimuli, or instantaneous dots within a larger realm, has proven to be devoid of meaning, and inconsequential to perception. "In reality, for pure description...the contiguity and resemblance of stimuli do not precede the constitution of the whole" (16). This is of course not to say that association, and memory don't exist, but it is to say that if we are not to become entangled in the language of the classical analysis, we must somehow find how association and memory themselves are grounded in present perceptual experience, which is constantly fortified with meaning. There must, therefore, be something about the present data that contains and guides the release of memories. The question to be asked and answered is therefore "What is it, in present perception, which teaches us that we are dealing with an already familiar object" (20). We are comfortable now with the knowledge that there is no associative force which acts autonomously as a cause of experience, and the notion of a 'projection of memories' is merely a 'bad metaphor' which clouds the immanent relationship between the past and the present.
It is here that Merleau-Ponty calls for a return to phenomena themselves, for it is at that basic level of experience that we find a 'whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning' (21-22). It is in this light that Merleau-Ponty calls for the need to view the past as a 'horizon' of its own, or a "field which is always at the disposal of consciousness and one which, for that very reason, surrounds and envelops its perception" (22). To remember then, is not to bring back a state of consciousness which is a self-sustaining picture that focuses itself on top of my present percept. To remember is to delve back into a living horizon and delineate all perspectives until "the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting" (22). We see here that the past, as well as the figure-background relationship, are irreducible structures of a consciousness that is destined to the world. Merleau-Ponty warns that empiricism will always look at this a priori as if it were a product of 'mental chemistry', and comments that those already committed to an objectivist viewpoint will continually find the 'physico-chemical' processes more real than 'perceived phenomena'. But, Merleau-Ponty maintains that a return to things themselves will be justified on account of the abundance of phenomena that it elucidates (23).

We have seen therefore, that empiricist thought deprives us of the unity, and substantiality of things by picturing these things as having been produced by association, or projected from our memory. Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes that empiricism has deprived the 'cultural' or 'human world', as well as the 'natural world' from the meaning inherent in them. For empiricism, "there is nothing in the appearance of a landscape, an object or a body whereby it is predestined to look 'gay' or 'sad', 'lively' or 'dreary', 'elegant' or 'coarse'" (23). The pain that we read in a friend's face, or the intimidation of a certain foreign city are written off in empiricist terms as being projections of memories from an 'acosmic' thinking subject. Similarly the natural world is falsified, as our perceptions of
the 'crumbling cement under the building' or the 'tiring actor under the character' are disregarded by empiricists as being the product of some association. We shall therefore have to rediscover and describe the phenomena, and presence of the 'cultural' and 'natural world' as we re-embrace a reflective phenomenology that recognizes 'empiricism's subordinate truth and assigns to it its proper place.'

'Attention' and 'Judgment'

Earlier in his introduction, Merleau-Ponty had noted that the notion of attention is not supported by any evidence provided by consciousness, and subsequently it is an 'auxiliary hypothesis' constructed to save the prejudice in favor of an objective world'. The third chapter of his 'introductory' critique on classical approaches to perception is therefore a return to that earlier statement about the role of attention (and as we shall later see, judgment) in the phenomenon of perception. Until this point, the brunt of Merleau-Ponty's criticism has fallen on the shoulders of empiricism. But it is in this chapter that he formulates a challenge to intellectualist thinking, and succeeds in pointing out that the two schools of classical thought share the same prejudices, neither being capable of explaining our perceptual experience.

For its part empiricism takes the world as an objective given that is continually impinging stimuli upon the perceiver, whose brain must then decode the incoming information in order to form an image, or a picture of the stimuli being transmitted. An integral part of this theory revolves around the 'constancy hypothesis' which maintains that we have a constant point-by-point correspondence between stimuli and perception. As Merleau-Ponty has shown however, when what we perceive does not in any way correspond to the supposed objective stimuli in the world, the constancy hypothesis forces us to admit that the 'normal sensations' are already there, but our 'mis-perception' must be caused by some sort of lack of
attention. Attention is seen here through the metaphor of a searchlight, forever immersed in a pool of stimulus information, but only elucidating what it happens to fall on. "Attention is therefore a general and unconditioned power in the sense that at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness" (26). In itself attention is thus barren and purposeless, forever 'taking notice' of the outside world through some act of initiative. If we try to relate attention to consciousness on empirical terms, we find ourselves at an unexplainable crossroads. For if the relationship between perception and attention was fundamentally an internal connection where perception awakens an attention that then enriches and develops that perception, we would find empiricism trapped without recourse as it has admittedly only external connections between things in the world at its disposal.

In order to explain the noticeable gaps in empiricist theory of perception, psychology turned to intellectualism. Unlike empiricism, which strips attention of content, intellectualism begins with the 'fruitfulness' of attention, or the notion that what I encounter in the world will have a prefabricated explanation waiting for it in my consciousness. It can be fairly stated that intellectualism views attention as something which 'calls up' a succession of pictures through which I will come to the truth, or to conscious knowledge. Thus we find in theory a constituting consciousness that creates the structure of that which we perceive, and that structure is there whether we see it or not. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a plate to say that if consciousness finds in the plate the form of a circle, it is because consciousness previously placed it there before the actual perception took place. If consciousness itself creates perceptual structures, then it must always and already have 'ideas' of our percepts before we arrive at them--learning, contingency and exploring in the name of description are therefore obviated. As Merleau-Ponty states "in a consciousness which constitutes everything, or rather which
eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects...attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform" (28). However, this postulate doesn't conform to our experience: for example, when we see something nondescript, we try to make the object of our perception more explainable by paying closer attention to it. We find then, that empiricism makes its mistake in that it "cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching" (26).

Even though empiricism and intellectualism would appear to address the question of perception from exactly opposite positions, Merleau-Ponty shows how both doctrines share the same dogmatic adherence to the 'natural attitude' that is shared by common sense and the sciences. Neither empiricism nor intellectualism can grasp consciousness in the act of learning, and the two concur in the belief that attention can create nothing, since the world is either a 'reality in itself', or an 'immanent end of knowledge'. Where empiricism gives humans the 'blank slate' on which impressions impinge from a determinate world, intellectualism counters with an absolute subjectivity in which a universal consciousness is capable of duplicating and sustaining the empirical world that it sees. Both philosophies maintain the same bias against perception, and both are incapable of describing the actual phenomenon.

"The first operation of attention," Merleau-Ponty counters "is to create for itself a field" (29). To help him elucidate his point here Merleau-Ponty uses the example of patients having a certain disorder whose origin is in the central nervous system. When the patients are touched in a certain place on their body, it is explained, they cannot precisely locate the point where the contact is being made--yet they are not totally ignorant of the touch either. What we have here is a 'vaguely located spot' that disproves both the empiricist and intellectualist notion of attention simultaneously: for the
vaguely located spot reveals "a pre-objective space where there is indeed extension...but as yet no univocal position" (29). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty speaks of infants who, during the first nine months of life, can only distinguish between 'the colored' and the 'the colorless', and soon after the 'colored' areas become categorized in the general 'warm' or 'cold' shades. It is not, as had once been believed, that the children were merely failing to pay attention to 'their own phenomena'. What this presupposition misses is the world of the indeterminate, which uncovers attention as that by which the visual field is articulated. As Merleau-Ponty says "[t]o pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures" (30). Attention is thus not an 'association of images', or a return to the thought itself that was 'already in control of its objects'; it is an active process that serves to articulate and make lucid an object that was once indeterminate. What we get here is the conception of an object that is not the cause of the event of attention, but nonetheless it is a motive which is in active conversation with the 'knowledge-bringing event'. In order to bring the object to a distinguishable meaning, this event requires the object's ambiguity, by means of which we can transform the indeterminate to something understandable; and this is the process of 'thought itself'.

Intellectualism has always prided itself on 'refuting' empiricist doctrine, but at the same time gets caught up in empiricist language. For example, when intellectualism desires to portray the structure of perception, it finds itself paradoxically trying to join the points of sensation in order to explain the phenomenon. Therefore, to eschew this crossing over into empiricist thought, intellectualism introduced the concept of 'judgment' as being that which 'sensation lacks to make perception possible'. In other words, when the sense impressions are not lucid, or if there is discrepancy between sense impression, or if there is some sort of illusion, we use our judgment to explain the disparity. If empiricism thought that
it succeeded with the theory that perception is the summation of sense qualities, analytic reflection succeeded in showing that the least illusion, which endows the object with properties it does not possess on my retina, can serve to disprove just such a theory. But to say that illusion can be explained through the act of judgment is equally misleading. For then perception becomes an 'interpretation', or a 'hypothesis' that the mind uses in order to 'explain its impressions to itself'. If I lift two boxes that weigh the same amount, but are drastically different in size, I say that the larger one is the heavier. Any theory of sensory knowledge is here disproved, and intellectualism explains my mistake by saying that I 'misjudged'. In this way, judgment consumes the actual phenomena of perception, and we can no longer say that we 'see' or 'hear' or 'feel'; perception is thus stripped of its meaning. If this is the case though, how can we ever distinguish between 'true' and 'false' perceptions. Everything that we perceive is ultimately thrown into the realm of 'taking a stand', or guessing. Since seeing in intellectualist language is ultimately a judgment of what we actually see, how will it be possible to say that the patients who suffer from hallucinations 'think they see what they do not see' : "[w]here will be the difference between 'seeing' and 'thinking one sees'" (35)? If one argues that the normal person judges only by 'adequate signs' or 'completely coherent material', then the problem is merely avoided, rather than confronted. It will still be necessary to show how we can decipher between adequate, and incoherent material. Merleau-Ponty concludes that we must realize an 'immanent sense in the sensible' before we can even do things like judge, or associate. As he explains "[t]he phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgment is merely the optional expression" (35).

The major flaw of analytical reflection, as Merleau-Ponty points out, is that it is a regressive doctrine that succeeds in making perception a thoroughly confused, 'muddled form of intellection' that remains completely unaware of it's own
beginning. In analytical reflection I first of all see myself as 'surrounded by my body', situated here and now in a particular place in the world. And since I am a consciousness, "a strange creature which resides nowhere and can be everywhere present in intention" (37), I know where I am and can see myself among other things or other beings as consciousness (for those are the only two ways something can exist in analytic thought). Accordingly, perception must be nowhere, for if it were situated in a place, "it would repose in itself as things do," (38) and become incapable of making things 'exist for itself'. Perception, in analytic terms, is therefore thought about perception. Perception is hence not something that gives us access to knowledge, but rather its essence comes in the form of 'its own ignorance of itself'. What Merleau-Ponty wants to ask therefore, is 'how is this ignorance possible'? How can we adhere to a philosophy that regresses into ignorance, and avoids the 'living nucleus of perception' that needs to be described? What a philosophy of perception needs is the unveiling of the processes that bring perception into reality, rather than one that looks for the conditions that make it intellectually possible.

The efforts of empiricism gave us the objective world that 'acted upon our eyes so as to cause us to see it' (39). The analytic counterpart to this theory, as we have seen, is the move to complete subjectivity, where we have thoughts about the world, or consciousness of the world. In both cases a knowledge of the world will forever remain unreachable, for our relationship to it is based on the external appearance of what we see. The nature of the world is in this case "defined by the absolute mutual exteriority of its parts, and is merely duplicated throughout its extent by a thought which sustains it" (39). We are forever excluded from the 'law or secret' of various objects, and the world, and are limited to a 'natural attitude' that pushes us to look for the reality beyond what we see, the 'true' behind the illusion.
It is here that Merleau-Ponty begins to describe what needs to be done if reflection is going to cease to be something that 'anticipates all possible knowledge over and above what we at present know' (41), and return to the phenomenal world. Unlike Cartesianism, where there is always a distance between the perceiving subject, and the subject which analyzes, true phenomenological reflection must consist of an abolition of this distance and a realization that 'I am capable of knowing what I was perceiving' (43) at every moment. Also, where the cogito was once thought of as that which revealed to me a 'universal constituting force', reflection needs to expose the significance of the cogito in "establishing the fact of reflection which both pierces and sustains the opacity of perception" (43): unlike Kant and Descartes, we need to understand perception in terms of its being an 'originating knowledge'.

This phenomenological reflection that Merleau-Ponty speaks of cannot be an explanatory doctrine, but one that attempts to embrace the perceptual process in its entirety. The criticism of the constancy hypothesis showed us that perception is not an act of understanding. For if the two terms were synonymous, I could correctly perceive a landscape, or the picture of a face when presented upside down. "[T]here is a significance of the percept which has no equivalent in the universe of the understanding, a perceptual domain which is not yet the objective world, a perceptual being which is not yet determinate being" (47).

Merleau-Ponty for the first time explicitly differentiates his own philosophy from the Gestalt theorists in his rejection of a determinate universe. On the topic of distance for example, Gestalt psychology expressly posits that an observer can correctly perceive the approximate distance of an object through the alleged 'signs' of distance which include: the apparent size of the object, the 'number of objects' interposed between the observer and the object in question, retinal disparity, the degree of adjustment and convergence. From this Merleau-Ponty concludes that Gestalt accepts these 'signs'
as being the causal agents of our perception, and accuses Gestalt thinking as having never broken with 'naturalism'. The perception of distance is not involved in a causal relationship that relies on certain objective rationale: these 'signs' are "tacitly known to perception in an obscure form, and they validate it by a wordless logic" (49). To explain his thinking Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a subject who has lost the use of his oculo-motor muscles. When the subject subsequently believes that he is turning his head to the left, he sees the objects to his left moving. What Gestalt would tell us here is that the perception of the position of objects does not need to go through the detour of a 'body-consciousness'. In other words the subject would directly perceive the landscape move to the left, without at any moment knowing that the images remained stationary on his retinas. But Merleau-Ponty argues, "consciousness is not confined to receiving ready-made an illusory phenomenon produced outside itself by physiological causes" (47). Therefore, for the illusion to have occurred, the subject must have actually thought that he had moved his eye; he must have intended to look to the left. And as we shall later see in much more explicit detail the body has in it an inexpressible perceptual significance that forms a well articulated relationship with external perceptions. Implicit in this relationship is an understanding of the motives of the perceptual organs such that the changes that are brought about in the visual spectacle are comprehended 'instantly'. The paralysis of the oculo-motor system, to the immobility of the retinal images are therefore not causes of illusion, but they are the 'motives' that gives rise to such an experience.

It doesn't seem that Merleau-Ponty is rejecting Gestaltist thought, as much as he is calling for a more radical reflection than Gestalt is capable of giving in its current mind-frame. Merleau--Ponty in fact gives credit to Gestalt for admitting to the 'principle' (presumably of perception) and even going so far as to apply it to a 'few individual cases'. But, he recommends strongly a setting aside the 'categories of the world', and a
placing in doubt of the 'alleged self-evidence of realism' in order to reform understanding so that phenomena can be accurately translated. In order to do this, a phenomenal reflection will have to accept a consciousness that is 'non-positing', which is part of a certain 'lived through logic' that is always conversing with the world, and always finding an 'immanent meaning', that is not totally graspable, but also of which consciousness is not ignorant.

The Phenomenal Field

Merleau-Ponty's final introductory chapter on the phenomenal field serves as both an overview of the preceding arguments he levied against classical philosophies, and a summary of his own description that will be explained in more detail in the chapters to come.

Merleau-Ponty begins by noting that sense experience is no longer self-evident, and must be once again called into question. As we saw in the chapter on 'association and the projection of memories', empiricism attempted to reduce sense experience to the possession of 'qualities' and our bodies to mere mechanisms that are potentially and passively stimulated. In order for a 'quality' as such to be the foundation of a 'sense experience', the world would have to exist autonomously in itself, while our bodies would necessarily have to act as objects inhabited by a thinking subject. What empiricism essentially did was render our experience foreign to us by substituting a certain significance that we experience with every perception, with causal, mechanistic relationships. If a child is burned by a candle for example, the flame no longer appears as merely a flame, but as something immersed with a specific meaning for the child, namely that the next time the child touches the flame, he will get burned. "Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (sens) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world an in our existence" (52). What phenomenology must do therefore is return to this
immanent significance that we experience as 'incarnate subjects'. A phenomenological method must re-embrace the vital communication we have with the world, and make the latter no longer merely a spectacle, but the 'familiar setting of our life'.

We have seen the problems that arise when we try to define terms such as 'sensation' and 'judgment' in terms of the prejudice that favors a determined world that is 'understood' by a perceiving consciousness. Trying to picture a consciousness in the act of judging or sensing leaves us in an endless regress that can never fully find the point where perception begins. If we want to understand such terms (and perception in general), we need to abandon the 'natural prejudice' that makes our perceptions incomprehensible, and return to things themselves, in which the first step, according to Merleau-Ponty, is to circumscribe a phenomenal field, from which our perceptual experience can be rediscovered.

For centuries now, Merleau-Ponty contends, both science and philosophy have adhered to an 'unquestioning faith in perception', which in the end has only served to confuse the phenomenon. This 'unquestioning faith' hinges on a belief that perception is something which can continually be built up, in the sense that every instant that I have experienced can be re-coordinated with my present experience to create knowledge. Anything that I therefore cannot recognize is merely attributed to my own lack of intelligence, and the identity of whatever it is that is indeterminate for me, already must have a built-in meaning of which I am ignorant. For its part, science gave us a preconceived world and established statistically the chemical properties of its various bodies, and a corresponding ideal of knowledge that would have to sift through empirical facts in order to arrive at the clarity of an object. Concepts like geometrical space and pure movement were objectively defined by scientific knowledge and became so many theoretical states of 'inert existence' that could be explained away by physical conditions. There was, with the rise of
scientific knowledge, a certain 'freezing of being' that took for
granted the history of the perceiver and looked instead at the
'conditions which make being possible'. According to scientific
method then, the living body, or the incarnate subject, was
viewed as a 'network of general properties' that for all intents
and purposes could not find a place in the system of experience
unless made into an object that lived in an objective world. "In
ordinary experience we find a fittingness and a meaningful
relationship between the gesture, the smile and the tone of a
speaker," (55) Merleau-Ponty points out, but in the eyes of
mechanistic physiology this 'fittingness' could only be reasoned
by a series of causal relationships. Emotions and attitudes
were hence explained as the outcome of a transfer in the
nervous system that produces impressions of pleasure and
pain. Gestures and movements were accordingly objectified in
the way that emotions were, being given over to a mechanism
of the nervous system.

Since my intentions could be written off as products of
causal relations, and my body ceased to be the expression of
being in the world and became an automaton inhabited with an
exteriorless interior, a ghost in the machine, "there was no
longer any real for-itself," there was only a collection of things
in-themselves. There was therefore no way of knowing other
people since the exterior of the body was merely a thing, and
the interior had no face. The 'empirical Self' that mechanistic
physiology attempted to create was constantly at odds with
what it was supposed to be: both an object with a concrete
content that could experience the world, and a transcendental
subject that could not experience the world first hand.

We find now that this philosophy that leads to the
'ideality of the object' and the 'objectification of the living body'
is collapsing under the narrowness of its own categorical
attitude. We find that the living body is not the complex
combination of physico-chemical relationships, but rather an
immanently meaningful being that can only be analyzed with
respect to history and the body's own ambiguity. We can no
longer be content with the notion that there is a universal value or form of thought. "Human society is not a community of reasonable minds, and only in fortunate countries where a biological and economic balance has locally and temporarily been struck has such a conception of it been possible" (56). A contemporary philosophy must give positive meaning to chaos and the indeterminate. Above everything else though, we must keep in mind that perception is not the incipient science that it was once thought of as, but rather the basis from which all other sciences are born. A return to phenomena themselves, to the world as actually experienced and prior to the object world of science is thus the 'first philosophical act' as Merleau-Ponty has it.

The phenomenal field that Merleau-Ponty has been discussing is not the 'inner world' of the subject, or some state of consciousness as introspectionism or intuitionism would have it. Introspective psychology for its part gave us the idea that knowledge was achieved when the subject and the object 'coincided', but maintained the presupposition, and prejudice in favor, of a determinate world. In this sense, the 'immediate data of consciousness' was an intangible prospect, since the perceiver of some object could not be entirely aware of what he/she saw unless he thought about it first. "The immediate (perception) was therefore a lonely, blind and mute life" (57). Hence the notion of the immediate had to be changed generally from a state of qualitative impressions to a structure of meaning inherent in the arrangement of parts.

Only if we abandon the idea that impression are the basis of perception can we begin to understand the problem of other people: "Once the prejudice of sensation has been banished, a face, a signature, a form of behavior cease to be mere 'visual data' whose psychological meaning is to be sought in our inner experience, and the mental life of others becomes an immediate object, a whole charged with immanent meaning" (58). In other words others' lives become accessible to us in their behavior, rather than having to be inferred through some
mental deduction. The immediate is not an instance of consciousness constructed out of 'psychic facts', it is the very structure of behavior itself laden with significance.

Up till this point we have seen how the 'naturalism' of the sciences, and the 'spiritualism' of introspection have dominated philosophical thought. The psychologist can break away from these pedagogies by "taking the Gestalt as the theme of his reflection," as Merleau-Ponty has commented before. In this way, there is no fortuitous coming together of sensations through which we have recourse to understanding the scene before us. Instead the 'connection and truth' of the percept are given to us immediately and are irreducible. The fault of psychological reflection to this point has been that it continually goes back to a positing consciousness thereby making the Gestalt a transcendental, and not a phenomenal, field. But, Merleau-Ponty is quick to remind us, an uncritical acceptance of Gestalt psychology can lead to the same problems experienced by introspection. He state that "although the Gestalt may be expressible in terms of some internal law, this law must not be considered as a model on which the phenomena of the structure are built up" (60). Gestalt psychology cannot rest on the pre-supposition that there is an assemblage of 'forms' that produce in us a certain state of equilibrium. What we perceive is not the 'external unfolding' of a pre-existing reason. Gestalt psychology cannot succeed if it adheres to an explanatory tendency that ultimately distorts our perceptions much the same way that classical philosophies have.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not a return to a universal reason as Hegel, or others, would have had it. If we get caught up in the language of a universal reason or transparent consciousness, we immediately lose track of our pre-objective inseperability with a lived-through world, and concentrate on the act of awakening the thoughts that constitute ourselves, the world, and other people. What is necessary, on the other hand, is the recognition that reflection is not a constituting act, but a
description of phenomena which are of an 'original order'. Merleau-Ponty does well here to recapitulate just what the terms 'phenomenology' and 'field' mean to him. Phenomenology is not the presuming of the possibility of a being as it is already given. On the contrary a true phenomenological approach, by definition studies the 'advent of being to consciousness'. Furthermore, by using the word 'field' as foundational, phenomenology emphasizes the irreducibility of the world of which we are a part, and the unique, albeit limited, perspective each of us holds. Merleau-Ponty comments that "it is striking how transcendental philosophies of the classical type never question the possibility of effecting the complete disclosure which they always assume done somewhere" (61). Critical philosophy must realize a thinking ego inherent in the body, the latter being that which gives us a particular perspective that no others have. The way that I see the sun residing over my neighbor's house, or the manner in which I view my mother or the inside of my apartment do not answer to what a transcendental 'idea of knowledge' posits. A philosophy cannot be satisfied in judging 'what is by what ought to be'.

Merleau-Ponty concludes his introduction by commenting that "the core of philosophy is no longer an autonomous transcendental subjectivity, to be found everywhere and nowhere: it lies in the perpetual beginning of reflection, at the point where an individual life begins to reflect on itself" (62). We are cautioned that we can never fully grasp the unreflective subject-incarnate that we strive to comprehend. This harkens back to the nature of phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty outlined in the preface: "[t]he unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which had surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world" (xxi). Similarly we can never reach a unity with consciousness: if we did it would mean we had ready at hand the world, our lived history and the general
history around us, and perceived objects in their unique totality. The philosophy that Merleau-Ponty is beginning to describe only remains true to itself when it questions reason's 
*presumption* that knowledge can make itself totally explicit through reflection. A return to things themselves, in order to get away from an *impregnable Cogito* that will forever remain in the transcendental dimension, will be the fundamental bridge that must be crossed if we are to understand the phenomenon of perception. That is why a description of the phenomenal field, and a rejection of psychologism served to revive our perceptual experience as it was once buried under ideal concepts and causal explanations. Reflection is only truly reflection if it knows that it is reflecting on an unreflective experience. And it is through this radical reflection that we can understand the changes in the 'structure of our existence' and become comfortable with the notion of philosophy as a creative elucidation of our experience.

**Experience and Objective Thought. The Problem of the Body**

The challenge with which Merleau-Ponty begins his own theory is to find a way to understand the birth of vision as significant without neglecting the fundamental role we play as incarnate subjects in the constitution of objects perceived or alternatively neglecting the role that objects play in offering up a resistance to our touch, or a depth to our vision. Previous theories (e.g. Leibnitz) attempted to explain perception as perspectiveless, in the sense that there was never any perspective that solely defined an object: things themselves are none of the perspectives from which we see them; they are "the geometrized projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives" (67). The house is different from the back, and the front, and the inside but this does not mean that the house exists in itself, and outside the grasp of some perspective. Don't we always see from somewhere? An object
that eschews perspective would be akin to saying that the object "is seen from nowhere", or is somehow invisible, which is in the end absurd.

To contradict this assertion Merleau-Ponty states that the phenomenon of seeing is a two-fold process that is at all times able to distinguish an object while simultaneously placing others in abeyance or in the periphery of our visual field. This is not a process that answers to the physiology of bodily parts per se. For "even if I knew nothing of rods and cones, I should realize that it is necessary to put the surroundings in abeyance the better to see the object" (67). Those objects that fall out of view around the 'focal figure' of perception contribute as much as the object itself concentrated upon in the system of vision in which we partake.

"Vision is an act with two facets" (68) and it is according to an object's 'horizons' that these facets are comprehensible. Each object has an 'inner horizon' that manifests itself when the object becomes the focal point of our gaze. At the same time every object is imbued with a characteristic power of creating a field or a more general horizon "in which there is implied, as a marginal view, the object on which my eyes at present fall" (68). For example, when an object becomes clear for us, when we focus on a chair, this act necessitates that the table surrounding the chair, and the books on the table, and the carpet under the chair, etc., all become somewhat ambiguous, lose their clarity, or more precisely fall into the periphery of our vision. This is not to say that these objects are somehow unimportant. On the contrary the peripheral horizon continually matters in perception by being something that gives depth to the object in the foreground while offering a field of possibilities that perception can draw from at any time. Perception is not a process of judgment or conjecture, but an actual involvement with a scene that is filled with meaning and information.

Fundamental for Merleau-Ponty is that we see from a certain perspective--this is undeniable. In fact for Merleau-
Ponty perspective does not imply some deformation of the object seen, but appears to the viewer as an essential property of the object. We realize that we can only see an object from a certain perspective, but because the object is a part of a larger structure of horizons, it is implicit that we could just as well see that object from any number of perspectives. To see an object therefore is to "inhabit" it, to have our gaze reside in the object while all other perspectives converge upon the object in sight. "Thus every object is the mirror of all others" (68). When we see an object we consequently do not see it from nowhere, but rather see it as though from everywhere, in the sense that each perspective looks to an infinity of other perspectives. Such an exploration is not intellectual, nor is it part of recollection, since the object seen does not garner its identity out of the construction of mental images, but from the information contained in the particular perception.

Just as the object is part of a spatial horizon that guarantees its identity, so is it part of a temporal structure, because identity implies temporality. "[E]ach moment of time calls all the others to witness" (69) Merleau-Ponty explains. The notion of horizons is here expanded to include the "immediate past" and the "immanent future". While I look at the house as mentioned earlier, I realize that the house was there before I started looking at it, thereby implying that our present perception holds on to the past without necessarily positing the past as a definite object. Likewise, I realize that the house will continue to remain where it is after I leave, meaning that the present also holds on to the immanent future. "Thus, through the double horizon of retention and protention, my present may cease to be a factual present quickly carried away and abolished by the flow of duration, and become a fixed and identifiable point in objective time" (69).

Merleau-Ponty is quick to warn that although our gaze, by means of the horizon-structure, is directed towards other objects, and similarly the past and future, we can never experience more than one facet of the perceived object.
Because of the openness of the spatio-temporal horizon structure, the experience of an object can never be absolute—in the sense that we could never compress an infinite number of perspectives into a strict 'co-existence'. We can conceive mentally all the other perspectives that define the object in question, but this conception merely yields our indefinite portrayal of the object, not the object in its 'plenitude'. The same is true with temporality; we can recall the past and think our memory is exactly as the past was, but in actuality we are merely seeing the past through present perception, after time and circumstance have altered that recollection. Thus the warning that the synthesis of horizons is presumptive, not comprehensive, and can act with "certainty and precision only in the immediate vicinity of the object" (70).

This last statement, that the synthesis of horizons as merely presumptive, alludes to another facet of horizon that is not thoroughly expressed: anonymity. This anonymous horizon can be best described as that horizon which was at one time present to us, but has now slipped into the indiscernible field that gives substance to our spatio-temporal existence, and is incapable of 'bringing any precise testimony'. The house has its water pipes, its floors beneath the carpeting, and the heating system in the walls—we never see them, but we know that they are there. Likewise, we once took our first steps, and babbled our first words—we don't remember them, but the events did take place. Objects and events therefore never 'reach perfect density', never become absolutes; their substantiality slips away with every subsequent moment of their absence.

The notion that some thing or event can exist as an absolute is based on the forgetting of the perspectivism of experience: "taken in itself--and as an object it demands to be taken thus--the object has nothing cryptic about it; it is completely displayed and its part co-exist while our gaze runs from one to another, its present does not cancel its past, nor will its future cancel its present" (70). But when we arrest our
experience, and posit an object we destroy temporality and restructure our experience based on the 'prejudice of the objective world'. "I regard my body, which is my point of view upon the world, as one of the objects of that world. My recent awareness of my gaze as a means of knowledge I now repress, and treat my eyes as bits of matter" (70). Yet our body is the living nucleus of all perceptual experience, and we thus cannot treat it as a mere object. To therefore restore the body as our 'point of view upon the world', and undermine the objective prejudice that misguides an understanding of the spatio-temporal structure of perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty examines 'the body as object and mechanistic physiology'.

The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology

As we have seen, objective thought posited a world that existed partes extra partes, or more precisely objective thought only recognized the external and mechanical relationships between an object's parts. Mechanistic physiology, by the same token incorporated the living body into a reflex-arc model, or a stimulus-response pattern. In this way the body was seen as something that various stimuli impinged upon and that were then translated into discernible perceptions. But physiology found that it had to abandon this approach that gave the nervous system the "occult power" of creating the differing structures of our experience. The reason it was forced to abandon this approach was that injuries to various centers and conductors in the nervous system did not translate into the complete loss of the appropriate qualities or sensations, but merely in the loss of "differentiation in the function" (73). With the sense of touch for example, a non-cortical injury to a patient does not produce a loss of the ability to feel heat and cold; for if the energy is strong enough, the patient most definitely feels these sensations. A purely causal explanation has to be discredited as a pretense that neglects a more fundamental truth regarding perception.
However, since stimulation of a sense organ does not invariably produce a perception (for example a hair that has repeatedly been stimulated and is thus rendered 'perceptionless'), objective thought described a certain 'psychophysical event' that departed slightly from a strict causality and explained perception as an 'attuning' of an organism to any excitation at hand, be it visual, tactile, etc. "The function of the organism in receiving stimuli is," according to this belief, "to conceive a certain form of excitation" (75). According to this theory, any excitation must first be 'seized and reorganized by transversal functions' (even before it is an actual excitation) and then create some image of the object which perception is about to arouse. Our experience of the body, looked at in this light, is reduced to a collection of 'psychic facts' that would have to predict the perceptions experienced through and by our phenomenal body. Thus the model that set out to explain the mystery of the object-subject dichotomy only served to create greater confusion by introducing an abstract mixture of psychological and physical factors--an 'attuning' organism that 'under-stands' forthcoming excitations--instead of dealing adequately with actual account of real experiences.

As we have seen, modern physiology has attempted to explain perception in terms of stimuli, or lack of stimuli to a subject. But does this explanation conform to our experiences? To answer in the negative, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the phantom limb, and anosognosia (or the failure on the patient's part to recognize a disability). A purely physiological approach cannot explain why the subject has the experience of a lost limb in detail (or at least how the limb felt before it was lost), even after the subject has been anaesthetized. Likewise, psychological accounts have perennially come up short as they cannot explain away why, when the afferent nerves to the brain are severed, the experience of the phantom limb is abolished. "What has to be understood," Merleau-Ponty suggests, "is how the psychic determining factors and the physiological conditions gear into each other" (77). In other
words, we need to find a new way of dealing with phenomena such as the phantom limb and anosognosia that has been overlooked by traditional philosophies. But trying to combine certain aspects of both theories, as Stein did with ‘attuning’ sensory organs, will only serve to obscure further an already difficult problem. In order to combine the theories successfully, one would have to find the dialectical union of a being that is partially ‘in-itself’ as physiology would have it, and simultaneously ‘for-itself’, which is the psychological antithesis to biological thought.

Thereby, Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of being in the world, or that middle term we’ve been searching for that situates human existence between the ‘for-itself’ and the ‘in-itself’. By way of a sort of preliminary step Merleau-Ponty initially comments on the instinctive acts of an insect, which even for being instinctual does not work on the basis of causal physiology. Mechanistic physiology will never be able to explain why the insect will replace its leg when the leg is severed, but not when the leg is merely ‘tied’. Merleau-Ponty explains that even though we can say that an animal (or insect) exists, that it has, or belongs to a certain world, we cannot realistically recognize the insects substituting of a new leg as an act of conscious decision making (78). Ultimately, the animal’s instinctive process will forever remain inarticulate and indeterminate. However, this does not absolve physiological thought from the inaccuracy of its position, for the animal does not rely on purely automatic responses either; there is a ‘blindness of instinct’ that will continually elude definition. Hence we need, even at the level of bugs, a new description of the body that transcends physiological and psychological inadequacies.

Is this being-in-the-world similar to Bergson’s ‘attention to life’ or Janet’s ‘function of the real’ asks Merleau-Ponty. Not really: for Bergson maintained that knowledge is only possible through a ‘mind’ that oversees the actions of a body, and Janet was never able to forgo the idea that somehow the world
spread out in front of us was merely a representation (79). What Merleau-Ponty shows in contradistinction to these theories is that at all levels of existence there is a manner of being which is inseparable from the world, and is able to unify the physiological and the psychic. For example reflexes, the closest thing to instincts that humans were thought to have, can no longer be conceived of as ‘blind processes’; instead we should see in them an anticipation of our stance in the world, to put it differently a certain ‘direction’ of our situation which is expressed through a pre-objective “orientation towards a ‘behavioral setting’”(79).

When Merleau-Ponty refers to the ‘world’, this is not to be confused with the simple collection of elements that the physical sciences attempt to treat it as. The ‘world’ is much more than that: it is always possessed with a meaning too rich for us to know entirely. I can reflect and rediscover the meaning which I experience here and now, but must also realize the spatio-temporal nature of such an experience, which places me in an historical context for every situation. We can realize that the insect discussed earlier also exists in a world, or probably more accurately ‘belongs to a world’, and therefore has a bodily intentionality that propels the insect to ‘rise towards (its) world’. Granted the insect’s behavior is ostensibly more of an a priori than a personal choice, while the human is a far more complex creature; however, in both species we can see the intentionality that is the font of all behavior.

In the insect we saw the phenomenon of intentionality expressed when its legs were tied and severed. Similarly we can understand better human intentionality as expressed through being-in-the-world by turning back to the problem with which we began--the phantom limb and anosognosia. As we have already noted, the difficulties of understanding a physiological and psychological--and hence empirical and intellectual--exploration of this problem lie in their objective categorizations: with the one philosophy we have the presence of a representation, and with the other the representation of a
presence (80). The truth is that like the subject in psychoanalysis, the patient with a phantom limb or afflicted with anosognosia is probably too conscious of the dilemma, or so conscious that the phenomenon becomes ‘ambiguous’ or ‘unclear’ under the weight of the will to have a ‘sound body’. Reminiscent of this explanation is Sartre’s idea that nothingness in itself is a positive presence. In fact Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to say that the presence we feel of a deceased or absent friend is analogous to what the person with a phantom limb experiences: which means naturally that the anosognostic, the person with a phantom limb, and myself expecting to see a deceased relative when I’m strongly experiencing a recollection, all to an equal extent have a pre-conscious knowledge, or a knowledge built into our bodies through time, of what is missing, be it a muscular function, leg, or grandmother.

Only by invoking the notion of being-in-the-world can we finally begin to understand anosognosia and the phantom limb: they are disablements that affect one’s being-in-the-world, or seen in another perspective they are disablements that a being-in-the-world refuses to initially recognize. The importance Merleau-Ponty attributes to the body in his theory becomes evident here: “[t]he body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for living creatures, to be interwoveled in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them”(82). The body is not therefore the machine that Descartes thought that it might be, but the only medium through which we are aware of the world. The body itself is thus both consciousness and object simultaneously, and furthermore the only way in which we can know objects. For example, how can I know what the texture of some object is in the dark? I simply grasp the object with my hands and feel it. Likewise how do I know what a foreign dish tastes like? If I’m bold enough I put it in my mouth and taste it. The body is what ultimately unifies us with the world around us.
Concretely though, we must ask why the anosognostic still tries to grasp things, and the patient still attempts to walk on his phantom leg, even when these patients might consciously realize their disabilities. Merleau-Ponty explains this by saying that the body comprises ‘two distinct layers’, the ‘habit-body’ and ‘the body at this moment’. The former denotes a lived-through past, or a habitual manner in which the body deals with a familiar setting. As such, the habit-body is a pre-reflective drawing together of past experiences that are appended to my body at present, and through which a certain future can be anticipated. Thus the anosognostic will continue to try to shake hands with a paralyzed arm, and the amputee will try to walk on a leg not there until the ‘habit-body’ can be readjusted to a new being in the world.

As was mentioned earlier, the psychoanalyst’s patient is faced with a similar obstacle to overcome. And it is through such patients that we can begin to understand the temporal structure we experience as body-subject. For the psychoanalyst’s patient, one moment in time often gains an exceptional value, and thus dominates existence. This moment could be signified by anything—from child abuse to a love affair. Regardless, that moment becomes somewhat of a fixation, and the patient becomes a prisoner of the past, a slave to an experience that eventually becomes generalized throughout ‘personal time’. This is not the same as merely remembering something, as memory never leaves consciousness, but rather “spreads out in front of us, like a picture, or former experience” (83).

While Merleau-Ponty repeatedly attacks the inadequacy of a mind-body dichotomy, his theory is expanded here to include a ‘human situation’ and a ‘biological situation’. As we have already established, the past is always carried with us insofar as its setting is part of our ‘habitual body’. In order not to have to remember everything in our past, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a general ‘repression’ that creates an ‘almost impersonal experience’ around our personal existence. This
‘almost impersonal existence’ can be viewed as a sort of periphery of general terms to which we belong, and in which we can then pursue personal endeavors. This general repression is ‘organic’ as Merleau-Ponty states, to the extent that it is rooted in biological existence. To bring to light what is being discussed here, let us look at two examples: the soldier in the trenches and the son at his mother’s funeral. For the soldier there exist times of such immanent danger that the ‘body will lend itself without reserve to action’ (84) by jumping on the live grenade, or charging the enemy's trench, etc. Similarly, while at his mother’s funeral, a boy cannot help catching notice of a shining leaf in the sun even though he is obviously drenched with grief. It is almost as if a “human situation abolishes (a) biological one” (84) in these instances, seemingly giving us recourse to a dualistic language. But Merleau-Ponty warns that “these moments can be no more that moments, and for most of the time personal existence represses the organism without being able to go beyond it or to renounce itself” (84). It is through this that we can see how the self is irreducible to a body and vice-versa.

The next logical question to be answered is “why does the cutting of afferent nerves abolish the phenomenon of the phantom limb?” Simply put, this is due to the fact that being in the world is based on bodily existence. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to say the sensori-motor circuit is ‘relatively autonomous’ to being in the world, as evidenced by the very human reaction to evoke ‘constant responses to stimuli which are themselves constant’. But as we have seen, bodily existence is not reducible to the laws of mechanistic physiology, but is itself perpetually imbued with meaning. This is not a question of joining circuitry with an inner soul, but rather a recognition of the unique “movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts” (88). Only in this way can we unite the ‘physiological’ and the ‘psychic’ in a common direction towards an intentional world.
In light of this we can see Merleau-Ponty’s endeavors to return our existence to a dialectic. As people are a continual movement between the past and present, so is history a movement which is neither entirely new or completely repetitious. This movement is what carries existence forward into a cultural world, then turns around and finds personal and cultural existence sedimented into certain ‘forms’. This is the dialectical movement which characterizes our existence as a body-subject and is subsequently what allows us to carve out our personal existence in a larger, cultural world.

The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology

In its attempt to distinguish the body from other objects, classical psychology outlined several ‘characteristics’ that were attributable to the body which made it incompatible with the definition of an object. However, because of its bias towards objective thought, classical psychology failed to appreciate the philosophical implications of the distinction it was beginning to make.

Classical psychology began by saying that the body itself has a permanence unlike objects. According to this line of thinking, we establish the invariance of an object through the unification of diverse perspectives in space and time. Furthermore, classical psychology considered an object to be an object because it could be completely removed from our field of view entirely. “Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence” (90). We cannot, on the contrary, detach ourselves from our bodies: “it (the body) is always near me, always there for me” (90). Hence, we can never extract our body from that central perceptual act; in short objects can be seen from only one side at a time, depending on which side of the object we are standing, whereas the angle from which we perceive our body is ultimately unchangeable. Objects ‘could not appear otherwise than in perspective’, namely because our body imposes on us a physical prison that promises us both a visual
demarcation and the tacit knowledge of an infinite number of possible perspectives. It must be noted, though, that this permanent presence of our body is what explicitly allows us to observe objects, and is the prerequisite for objects becoming absent from that view. To put it otherwise, there can be objects and factual situations for us to the extent that our body is not itself an object like others. Therefore the question of the body’s permanence is not analogous to the question of the permanence of objects. The body’s permanence is primordial (and not visible per se) and the lack of this invariable presence is inconceivable. As Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes it, the body is not something I observe, but something I observe with.

It’s not entirely true that our body is not observable, as we can look down and see pretty much our entire front side from the neck down. Merleau-Ponty is even willing to concede that our ‘visual’ body, or the bodily parts far removed from our eyes, is an object in a certain sense. But the body can never be an object like other objects, because even if we use mirrors to see all the sides of our body ‘simultaneously’, we are still only seeing different views of the vehicle of our intentions. What’s more, we can never perceive the body perceiving: the experience of touching the hand that is already touching something else shows that even though the hand being touched gives a perception of ‘a system of bones, muscles, and flesh’, the activity of touching itself can never be touched. Just the same, the eye we see in the three way mirror is not the eye in the process of exploring the world. “In so far as it see or touches the world, my body can...be neither seen nor touched” (92). Put differently, the body can never be an object, or in the words of Husserl ‘completely constituted’, because it sustains the communication I have with the world before I can objectify it. Thus classical psychology, although noticing a differentiation between the permanence of the body and objects, failed to recognize the body as our primordial communication with a world that is ‘anterior to every determining thought’.
Classical psychology also realized the body’s ability to experience ‘double sensation’, or the sensation of feeling and being felt simultaneously, as when one presses one’s palms together. But as Merleau-Ponty just explained, the hand cannot experience touching and being touched at the same time. “When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of touching and being touched” (93): the active, and passive roles of the body never coincide.

It was also stated by classical psychology that the body couldn’t be an object like others because it was ‘affective’. If we step on a nail we don’t feel that our foot is the cause of the pain, but the nail is—we only feel the pain in our foot. What’s more, classical psychology proposed that ‘kinesthetic sensations’ presented us with a comprehensive picture of our body’s movements, while external objects’ movement could be linked to a “mediating perception and to a comparison between successive positions” (94). If we want to move our car for instance, we have to go through a series of movements (walking, grasping, turning, etc.) that will accomplish the task. “But my body itself I move directly” (94). Every movement we decide to make is therefore immediately implemented in the sense that the part of the body we want moved doesn’t need to be sought out, doesn’t need to be made contact with (since we are always in contact with our body), and doesn’t need to be continually propelled, since it is already moving towards its end.

Thus the description of our body given to us by classical psychology appeared to be on the right track in clearly making the distinction between body and object. But as we said before, in a step natural to them, the psychologists ‘chose the position of impersonal thought’, thereby making their distinction incomplete. Instead of realizing the body’s dialectic role of subject-object, psychology sought to investigate the ‘psyche’ scientifically, and hence relegate the fundamental difference
between objects and the body as peculiarities of experience. In this way the experience of our body became no more than a psychological 'representation', whose gaps in actual experience could be explained away by other scientific disciplines. However, unlike the other sciences, the psychologists were ultimately studying their own experience, and not some physiological or atomistic phenomenon: "for whereas neither the physicist not the chemist are the objects of their own investigation, the psychologist was himself, in the nature of the case, the fact which exercised him" (95). Unbeknownst to him therefore, the psychologist undertook the study not of some representation or object, but of the body as experienced through a pre-reflective communion with an historical world. "[T]he psychologist's being knew more about itself than he did" (96); the psychologist's implicit knowledge of being both the subject and object of his study afforded him the experience of a pre-objective relationship with the world and other people, which was anterior to the conclusions the psychologist was attempting to draw. Through his criticisms of physiology, and now psychology, Merleau-Ponty has embarked on a 'return to experience' which itself has 'characteristics' that will further be explained in light of his radical reflection.

The Spatiality of the Body Itself and Motility

In the last two chapters we saw mechanistic and classical psychology attempt to define the body by viewing it either as an object, or a representation. Merleau-Ponty now begins his phenomenological description of the spatiality of one's own body.

Our experience shows us that our body parts are not 'an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space'. We do not, when we think of the structure of our body, speak of the distance between fingers, of the distance from the head to the feet. "I know where each of my limbs is through a body image," Merleau-Ponty notes. This is naturally not to be looked at as
some sort of ‘compendium’ of parts and experiences. Initially psychologists used the term ‘body image’ to denote as ‘association of images’, or rather a de facto totality of impressions which indicated where each body part was located at each instance. But if we look at the person who suffers from allocheria (who feels the stimuli applied to his right hand in his left) or the patient with the phantom limb, the old conception of body image appears inadequate. “[T]he spatiality of the body must work downwards from the whole to the parts;” (99) in other words, a body image necessarily implies a ‘comprehensive bodily purpose’ that is forever anterior to the ‘individual’ parts of the body, as well as my reflections.

We therefore begin to see a new definition for body image: “a total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world, a ‘form’ in the sense used by Gestalt psychologists,” (100) (and presumably not ‘form’ in the intellectualist sense). This move from the body image as a mosaic of qualities to a subject incarnate is significant in that the term incarnate intentionality itself implies the global pole of a certain bodily purpose. As the setting for all potential movement, the world must be included as the horizon always already outlined by my body. The body image provides me with an orientation and comprehensive understanding of where my limbs are as my body projects itself towards the world of its tasks. Hence our spatial existence via the body is not one of position in objective space, but rather one of situation: when we say ‘here’ in respect to some position of our body we are not commenting on the determinate position of an exterior object in relation to others, but the manifestation of an active intentionality in various purposes. Simply put, therefore, body image is akin to stating that the body is that comprehensive, pre-personal incarnation of being-in-the-world.

The central question that the first part of this chapter seems to be asking is “how can we grasp the spatiality of our body within the context of a larger space that is the world?” To begin with we must remember that all space is experienced
with a figure-background structure. In this larger structure though, we must realize how we, as bodies, form part of this system. In response Merleau-Ponty says that “one’s own body is the third term, always tacitly understood” (101). Since it is the condition whereby the figure-background structure exists for me, my body can be neither figure nor ground, but must be involved (as a ‘third person’), and must have a positive space that affords me the possibility of seeing other things. Thus every figure stands out from its background against ‘the double horizon of external and bodily space’. It isn’t so much a presupposition of objective space as it is of ‘oriented space’. It is this orientation to the world by means of our body that gives meaning to words like ‘on’, ‘under’, ‘besides’, or the other dimensions of an objective space. “Even if analysis discovers in all these relationships the universal relation of externality, the self-evidentness of top and bottom, right and left...prevents us from treating all these distinctions as nonsense, and suggests to us that we should look beneath the explicit meaning of definitions for the latent meaning of experiences” (102). Thus the bodily space and external space form a system in which my body (from a certain ‘here’, or from a certain perspective) acts as a pre-personal ‘background’ in which my intentions are manifested. In short, I am always situated in the world, and it is the way in which I engage in certain projects that reveals the essence of bodily spatiality. A study of motility will thus help elucidate the spatiality of one’s own body.

Normally we take our relationship with the world for granted. We take up what Merleau-Ponty, following Edmund Husserl, calls a ‘natural attitude’ that loses sight of the pre-reflective experience which defines us as beings in the world: this 'natural attitude' as used here indicates a certain stance that we take that separates from us a world of things that are given, and which can be observed and interpreted. In order to throw into relief what we take for granted, therefore, Merleau-Ponty’s makes use of patients whose beings in the world have somehow been disturbed. The study of motility
thus begins with ‘an example of morbid motility’ in the form of Gelb’s and Goldstein’s case study of a German soldier named Schneider. We find out later in the book that Schneider sustained an injury to the occipital lobe, due to a burst of shrapnel. Schneider is a unique case in that he is entirely capable of performing ‘concrete’ movements such as blowing his nose or cutting the leather to make wallets for his job; he can even perform these tasks with his eyes closed. But if Schneider is asked to perform an ‘abstract’ movement, that is a movement ‘not relevant to any actual situation’, he is fully incapable. The fact is that Schneider can only perform these ‘abstract’ movements if he is allowed to watch his limbs or markedly prepare his whole body for the event. He cannot point to any body part if asked, yet he has no problem slapping a mosquito that is biting his arm. If ordered to point to a part of his body, Schneider can only comply by grasping it, presumably because “[f]rom the outset the grasping movement is magically at its completion” (104). It is thus clear that Schneider has a conception of his bodily space only as a ‘matrix of habitual action’.

Schneider’s body image is limited therefore to the actual, be it his daily work routine, or the mosquito mentioned earlier. When he experiences the bite of a mosquito (or any itch for that matter) he does not need to first locate either the area of the bite or his hand; he directly experiences the place on his phenomenal body that itches and his hand as having the potential to relieve that discomfort. Hence Schneider has not lost completely the experience of his pre-reflective phenomenal body. Correspondingly his daily work-tasks mobilize through Schneider’s perception those ‘intentional threads’ that find their incarnation in his body. In short “the body is no more than an element in the system of the subject and his world” (106) where each of our ‘tasks’ has an end which calls upon our body through some sort of remote, ambiguous attraction to perform the necessary function to complete that intention.
Merleau-Ponty makes a certain point of noting that ‘illness’, a la manière de Schneider, is a total way of being in the world. Hence the difference between Schneider and the healthy person cannot be characterized through some sort of mental, or physiological set of facts. We cannot simply transfer “to the normal person what the deficient one lacks and is trying to recover” (107). For Schneider understands requests of him intellectually, and his ability to complete concrete movements proves that his physiology is intact and working. Since Schneider lacks neither motility nor thought, we begin to recognize that what he lacks is a ‘motor ‘intentionality’ that healthy people possess, and which anticipates their movement and potential movements. Healthy people, therefore, are in possession of ‘potential movements’ though their body which perpetually ‘reckons with the possible’ and has the ability to turn itself away from the actual world, and ‘moonlight’ in the realm of the abstract.

The difference between abstract and concrete movement probably deserves further comment, as it, in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, summarizes the difference between a normal and an impaired being in the world. We can begin by stating that “for the normal person every movement is, indissolubly, movement and consciousness of movement” (110). In other words, for normal persons movement is not an act in-itself, but an original matter of relating to objects, and is on the same footing as perception itself. Furthermore every movement has a certain background, against which every movement is sustained, and without which any movement is inconceivable.

To return therefore to the original problem, the difference between the abstract and concrete movement is that the background to the latter is merely given, and the background to the former is built up and lived through. If I motion my friend to come near, I am expressing a lived-through intention in a given situation. If my friend is not there and I perform the same movement nonetheless, my movement is seen as an end in itself, divorced from the factual situation in
which it was once present. "The former occurs in the realm of being or of the actual, the latter...is that of the virtual or non-existent" (111). What Schneider is thus missing by way of abstract movement is the ability to transcend the given world in accordance with any whim of the imagination. He is unable finally to project around himself the intentionality needed to 'polarize the world' into the signs that serve to motivate our actions.

Neither empiricist nor intellectualist psychology is able adequately to explain the primordial power of projection which is the distinguishing factor between normal and morbid motility. For its part empiricist psychology tries to explain a problem like the one Schneider experiences in terms of a deficiency in one or other of the senses. But is this possible? The problem can't be one of the loss of visual qualities, for we've seen subjects like Schneider who, while knowing how to knock on a door, cannot perform the given task if the door is slightly out of reach--while remaining in perfect sight. Can the problem therefore be one concerned with haptic perception, the 'sense of potential touch'? This hypothesis is just as inconclusive as that of visual representation for, according to Goldstein "[t]here is...no fact capable of decisively bearing out that the tactile experience of patients is or is not identical with that of normal people" (117). Simply put, and as Merleau-Ponty will explain in a later chapter, the senses are in constant communication, and damage to one will always affect the others to a degree which we will never know, without our own senses being damaged. It becomes evident through the eyes of Merleau-Ponty that in the study of human behavior "the facts are ambiguous, that no experiment is decisive and no explanation final" (116). Where empiricism consequently fails in the diagnosis of Schneider is in its attempt to isolate his senses from each other and look at a 'probable cause' of his illness. What we are now discovering is that the senses co-exist in 'one and the same phenomenon', and his illness is one that disturbs his entire being in the world, and not merely one
aspect. Hence "[p]sychological blindness, deficiency of sense of touch and motor disturbances are three expressions of a fundamental disturbance through which they can be understood and not three components of morbid behaviors" (119).

Psychology in general cannot get caught up in attempting to formulate exclusive interpretations, for that is an impossibility argues Merleau-Ponty, for certain definite reasons. To return to the aforementioned case in which patients were unable to knock successfully at a door for example, we found that neither the 'visual representation', nor the 'sense of potential touch' explanations were able to shed light on the problem at hand. Psychology cannot act as physics does therefore, and inductively 'choose according to the degree of probability'. As we have said before, ambiguous or anonymous phenomena also deserve credence in the realm of experience. In order for psychology to function as physics does (inductively), it would have to adhere to causal explanations which would reduce the body to an object in-itself.

For its part Intellectualism obscured the power to project one's being in the world by denying causal explanation and focusing on 'a reason or intelligible condition of possibility' for the patient's disturbance. In positing a transparent consciousness, intellectualism is forced to reduce 'everything that separates us from the real world'--for example error or illness--to a mere appearance. Intellectualism succeeds in transcending the naive realism of causal thought, but remains entirely abstract with its belief that movement could somehow be divorced from the 'stuff' in which it is realized, and grounded. For intellectualism movement is seen as a self-subsistent 'symbolic function' or 'representative function' that is more a function of the mind than the body. However, if we admit of a pure essence of consciousness that is placed outside of being, if we admit of a 'general symbolic faculty' that controls movements, how can we deny that the lunatic knows of his raving madness, and is allowing himself to be controlled
by his obsessions? Can we legitimately say that the lunatic is not really mad, but only thinks he is?

The task that Merleau-Ponty sets for himself is to find that middle ground between the for-itself and the in-itself, between intellectualism and empiricism, in order to explain why Schneider's 'collective entity' is incapable of putting "forth beyond itself meanings capable of providing a framework for a whole series of thoughts and experiences" (126). In general Merleau-Ponty is trying to discover the 'symbolic function' that breathes life into the various aspects of behavior without reducing the content of behavior into any one form or vice-versa.

If we want to understand this 'symbolic function' that rests on the dialectical nature of form and content, we must re-evaluate the intellectualist notion of intelligence which posits thinking as primarily a subsuming of specimens into categories. On the contrary, "[l]iving thought...does not consist in subsuming under some category" (128). Such a categorical attitude imposes upon words a meaning which is external to them. Normal persons have no need, say when presented with an analogy, to categorize terms by using a series of logical operations. On the contrary, it is only the patients like Schneider that need to make use of such a logical, concrete operation which serves to distinguish normal from impaired thought. Healthy persons are oriented in a system of meanings, they have an already acquired 'world of thoughts' at their disposal which affords them the opportunity to use so many concepts and judgments spontaneously in expression or conversation without there being any need to rely on a process of re-synthesis.

"[T]his acquired knowledge (this world of thoughts) is not an inert mass in the depths of our consciousness" (130), nor is it a 'final gain'. Instead, these thoughts are alive as long I am in a familiar surrounding where my bodily intentions can be manifested; further these thoughts are sustained by my present thoughts: "they (these thoughts) offer me a meaning,
but I give it back to them" (130). In this way we can have a certain 'mental panorama', with all its certainties and ambiguities, with all its sedimented, and spontaneous thoughts. 'Sedimentation' and 'spontaneity' is thus the essence of consciousness: "to provide itself with one or several worlds, to bring into being its own thoughts before itself, as if they were things, and [demonstrate] its vitality indivisibly by outlining these landscapes for itself and then [abandoning] them" (130).

Unlike Schneider therefore, normal persons do not perceive almost-amorphous patches to which they then categorically assign significances. Rather, they immediately recognize the 'the concrete essence of the object', they are immediately afforded a particular significance which the object possesses. As Merleau-Ponty says, normal persons engage in a 'subject-object dialogue' in discovering the meaning which permeates the object. Schneider can formulate intellectual significances, but this “meaning had to be brought in from elsewhere by a veritable act of interpretation” (131). Thus, despite the fact that he possesses a 'general intelligence' (he shows interest in the doctors' experimentation), he cannot freely arrive at religious or political opinions, because the details are overwhelming; his thinking is completely one-tracked—he can neither move nor speak extemporaneously. He is completely 'tied to actuality' and knows the past and future as 'shrunken extensions of the present'. Thus the seat of Schneider's illness lies in his being, 'his power of existing, and it is the entire 'intentional arc' which had for him atrophied.

This intentional arc is neither analogous to the reflex arc of the physiologist, nor is it similar to the pure power of representation posited by the intellectualists. It is anterior to the consciousness of traditional distinctions and exists as the unification of intelligence, sensations, and motility. Schneider’s ailing intentionality therefore brings to light the normal phenomenon of movement. Since his illness is not one of 'I think' nor of an isolated physiological impairment, we begin to see movement as that power through which we project
ourselves towards things in the world. "Motility, then, is not...a hand maid of consciousness" (139), but instead being-towards-a-meaning through the vehicle of our body. This is important because it concretizes our existence as a body-subject; that is, neither totally body nor completely subject. For 'the body has its world' that may be ambiguous or lucid to me, and correspondingly our knowledge can wax abstract, or imaginary without including our bodies. Accordingly Merleau-Ponty draws the conclusion that the body is not 'in' space and time, but inhabits them. "In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points...I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them" (140). Space is not something purely 'objective' or 'representative', it is built upon and into our bodily structures with the significance inherent in personal development. We can see for example that we when we zigzag our hand in the air, we don't need to add together all the movements which transpired—we simply know and are able to perceive the final position of the hand. "At each successive instant of a movement, the preceding instant is not lost sight of" (140). Simply put, instances are not a matter of conception; the body belongs to time, and has a lived through history that precedes immediate awareness.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of traditional philosophies hinges mostly on his disbelief in an 'intellectual synthesis'. For as we have seen, even empiricism requires the use of some 'interpreting mind'. The study of habits therefore serves to show how the world is 'built up', and how the dialectic movement of being cannot be broken up into isolated, studiable fragments. As we see, to learn how to type or play an organ, or to become accustomed to driving a car or wielding a cane is merely a matter of expanding our being in the world 'by appropriating fresh instruments'. "The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to
sight” (143). To become habituated to something is to become transplanted into a certain object, or conversely to incorporate the object into the body itself. The acquisition of a habit is not an intellectual synthesis of course: the typist would be forever burdened if he had to think of the location of each key when typing a letter. Similarly the pianist wouldn’t be able to extemporaneously produce such dulcet sounds if he had to synthesize intellectually the distance between keys in a chord. What’s more, “the process of habit is no different from the general one which we exercise over our body” (144). This is because it is the body which ‘understands’ the acquisition of a habit. It is no different for me to throw a football, clap my hands, or drive a car: in all cases it is my body which understands the appropriate movement in question.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis thus prompts us to revive our notions of ‘understanding’ and ‘meaning’, both of which have eluded traditional philosophies. To understand is to experience a reconciliation between our goals and what is given us. The whole of this understanding (as we have mentioned before) is anchored in our bodies, which are revealed to us as ‘an expressive space’, or rather the origin of expression which enables things (like my piano, or the blind man’s cane) to exist in a realm of significance. Thus it is our body which exists as “that meaningful core which behaves like a general function,” (147) and is the very condition for a meaningful world to come into being.

The Synthesis of One's Own Body

As we have seen, the various aspects of the body--the visual, tactile, and motor--are not factors that need to be coordinated, but indivisible powers structuring the unified nature of our behavior itself. If I want to reach for the phone for example, I do not merely grab the receiver, but tilt my head in a certain way, stiffen my back, in short take up a bodily position of phone communication. When “I desire a
certain result...the relevant tasks are spontaneously distributed amongst the appropriate segments (of the body)” (149). In so far as I am a body, my ‘parts’ are unified and need not explain anything to each other.

Instead of comparing the body to a physical object, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we compare the body to a work of art. For just as the poem uses words, and the painting uses colors to unify an irreducible meaning, so is the body ‘a nexus of living meanings’ that is not comprised of ‘a certain number of covariant terms’. Each ‘part’ of the body is a power inherently related to all others in the bodily schema, and any attempt to analyze one specific part is akin to analyzing one word of a poem or one note in a symphony.

As the study of motor habits has shown, the body-subject and its world form a related whole, a pre-objective unity. In general we find that habits allow for the synthesis of the body. This synthesis is not some intellectual maneuver (we don't think about how to perform a habit), but an extension of our capacity to perceive: habit does not consist of interpretation. Furthermore, habit can be generalized into a broader definition of existence: for just as the blind man uses his cane as an 'extension of (his) bodily synthesis' with which he perceives the world, so is my gaze a non-intellectual synthesis that yields to me the meaning inherent in my lived-through world. "In the gaze we have at our disposal a natural instrument analogous to the blind man's stick. The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over and dwells on them" (153). The synthesis of our body is not a product of an 'I think', but a 'momentum' towards 'equilibrium', towards a certain unity of the sensibilities.

The Body in its Sexual Being

Merleau-Ponty precedes his description of sexuality by commenting on, within the study of perception, the relative ease with which we can fall into the language of an
‘epistemological subject and...object’. He even goes so far as to say that “the natural world presents itself as existing in itself over and above its existence for me” (154). Mind and body, subject and object easily become lost in traditional dichotomies. Hence we must ask ourselves if there is any area of our experience which is not relatively objective, but has a noticeably personal significance. The area in reference of course is the body as sexual being, which Merleau-Ponty hopes will elucidate the ‘birth of being for us’.

As usual, Merleau-Ponty initiates his discussion with an examination of the breakdown of the body’s sexual being, in order that normal sexuality can be put in proper perspective. Again our subject is Schneider who, it will be recalled, began to suffer difficulties after a portion of his occipital region was damaged. After his injury Schneider lost all sexual longings, was no longer aroused by obscene pictures, and even kissing for him was no longer a stimulus for excitement. As neither psychological nor physiological explanation hold water here, Merleau-Ponty concludes that it is as if in Schneider there was “some change in the character of the sexual life itself” (155).

If we were to adopt a mechanistic physiological view and maintain that sexuality was an ‘autonomous reflex apparatus’--an anatomically defined organ responding to an object of sexual stimulation--it would seem obvious that a cerebral injury such as Schneider’s would accentuate sexual behavior, as there would be a lesser degree of intellectual inhibitions. But exactly the opposite is the case: all of Schneider’s desires are slowed to near negligibility. Therefore “[t]here must be, immanent in sexual life, some function which ensures its emergence, and the normal extension of sexuality must rest on internal powers of the organic subject” (156). The normal subject, the 'visible body' must be 'subtended' by a ‘sexual schema’ which is projected into an appropriately amorous situation, such that we discover within original intentionality a mode of perception whose element is strictly of the erotic world.
Perhaps no discussion on sexuality is complete without mention of Freud, and indeed Merleau-Ponty even states that he concurs "with the most lasting discoveries of psychoanalysis" (157). For it was through their research of sexuality that psychoanalysis found the general power of the libido, which was not relegated to the genital, but which "projected (one's) manner of being towards the world" (158). The comparison between the body and a work of art, if we see it in light of this discussion, begins to make more sense. For as a painting or song becomes a significant entity for us when we open our eyes or ears to the unique meaning of the colors or notes, so does the sexual significance of another manifest itself only insofar as we open our being to the unique, sexually meaningful person of our desires.

It might be objected here that psychoanalysis tends to 'expand' the notion of sexuality to the extent of making it synonymous with existence. Yet as Merleau-Ponty shows, impaired sexuality can be oddly linked with political or ideological success, as in the Casanova, who possesses a certain 'technical perfection' in the sexual realm, but may have a complete lack of vigor for the rest of life. We must conclude therefore, that sexuality is not reducible to existence, nor vice-versa. Existence is a more 'general current' which structures behavior in certain ways, and the "sexual life is a sector of our life bearing a special relation to the existence of sex" (159). As we have shown with Freud, there is no question of reducing sexuality to the mere genital, nor likewise thematizing it through the psyche. The middle ground that Merleau-Ponty is trying to emphasize therefore, through the body-subject's 'characteristics' a la sexuality, reflects our existence as incarnate subjects in whom all sectors of experience communicates in such a way that each remain distinctive, though not autonomous. "Thus sight, hearing, sexuality, the body are not only routes, instruments or manifestations of personal existence" (160); rather personal existence uses these
venues to express itself through the ambiguity which is the body.

To show, however, just how existence can absorb itself to a certain degree in the body, Merleau-Ponty embarks upon the description of a girl who has lost her voice since being forbidden to see her lover. It is known that she had lost her voice once before, and that occurred after an earthquake had caused her great stress. A strictly Freudian interpretation here would conclude with the girl's fixation on the oral phase of sexual development. What Merleau-Ponty draws from this is that the girl is not merely fixating on a 'sexual existence', but more generally on a co-existence with other people who are most intimately linked to her through the medium of language. "Loss of speech then, stands for the refusal of co-existence, just as, in other subjects, a fit of hysterics is the means of escaping from the situation" (160). Yet this is not to say that the girl is acting volitionally. "The sick girl does not mime with her body a drama played out 'in her consciousness'...she does not present a public version of an 'inner state'" (161). As we have repeatedly seen, the body can never be reduced to the mere outer casing for the true subject. For the plight of the sick girl to be understood then, we must start with the body as that project in which existence and world are inseparable. The girl's aphonia therefore is analogous to the anosophistic's repression of the reality of a paralyzed arm. "[T]he girl does not cease to speak, she 'loses' her voice as one loses a memory" (161). But memory, as Merleau-Ponty showed in the discussion on habit, is tied up in the significances incorporated into the generality of the body. Memories are grouped or repressed only in so far as they refer to a relevant area of our lives, hence the girl's inability to speak is a refusal of intersubjective being-in-the-world, and the transformation of a certain instance of her life into a de facto situation which all other instances must refer to.

The body's role in the light of this loss of voice is a dialectical one which sees to it that time is not arrested, that existence as intentional projection is not objectified. We saw
with the aforementioned girl how “the move towards the future, towards the living present or the past, the power of learning, of maturing, of entering into communication with others” (164) which is present in all of us, can be narrowed to one instance. We all have the power to step outside of ‘fluid’ time as she did, and sediment ourselves in some situation. But it is precisely this power, Merleau-Ponty says, that opens up the world for us as a significance to behold. Recovering for the girl therefore can only be had “when the body once more opens itself to others or to the past, when it opens the way to co-existence and once more acquires significance beyond itself” (165).

It’s important to note here that even though the body can cut itself off from the ‘circuit of existence’, the lovesick girl or the amputee for examples, still we cannot abolish all references to our present situation. In other words, even for the girl who is stuck in the past the body is still the vehicle for intentions which ‘spring afresh’ at every moment; it’s only that in the girl’s case intentions are diffused into a sort of ‘abstraction of existence’ in which she lives in former experiences that overshadow ‘natural time’. In contrast to the arrested existence of the girl, we can conclude that the normally functioning body, as ‘incarnate significance’, expresses ‘total existence’ with each occurring moment.

Yet this does not mean that the body and existence are parallels of each other. On the contrary, each presupposes the other in the dialectical process that gives meaning to our lives, and subsequently is what is frozen in the patient. As a form of this dialectical process, sexuality is imbued with a certain ‘existential significance’ that transcends any theory that explains the human as a collection of ‘psychic facts’ or a ‘bundle of instincts’. As Merleau-Ponty shows (and drawing from Sartre's analysis), the human usually shows the body 'nervously' or with an intent to fascinate. The fact that we have a body makes it a possibility that others will objectify it and, on the other hand, enables us to turn the gaze around and
reduce the other to a mere object. However, Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Marx here in stating that the mastery I experience by reducing another to an object “is self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized through the other’s desires, he is no longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but a being fascinated, deprived of his freedom” (167). Sexual desire is therefore a display of the dialectic of existence to the extent that we use our body to intrigue the other, yet try to be seem as more than just an object. We want to possess “not just a body, but a body brought to life by consciousness” (167); yet the effort on our part to gain possession strips the other of that very consciousness by reducing him/her to a thing grasped. Thus sexual life, or becoming lost in an erotic experience, brings to light the aspects by which the body can be an object, the pre-objective essence of sexuality, and the expression of those aspects of ‘autonomy and dependence’ which characterize a dialectical existence in general.

That sexuality is a part of a dialectic existence doesn’t mean that we can treat it as a ‘process of knowledge’ that finds visibility in consciousness. The same needs to be said about someone’s personal history, for the individual identity of someone through a history is not tied to any transcendent mind. It is true here that Merleau-Ponty has generalized the notion of sexuality such that it is present to us at all times ‘like an atmosphere’. Two mistakes must be avoided however: the first mistake would be to posit sexuality as some philosophy of consciousness would. We must not make the error of thinking that the form which we perceive is limited to some ‘obvious’ content. The second mistake would be to duplicate this ‘obvious’ content with a latent content which exists in some ‘unconscious’ realm for us. “Sexuality is neither transcended in human life nor shown up at its center by unconscious representations” (168).

Sexuality in this way is part of that co-existence of living significance which is anterior to our representations and is
essentially 'ambiguous' but not 'unconscious'. This is an important distinction, for an 'unconscious' as such simply means to Merleau-Ponty non-existence. Accordingly, our incarnate existence is characterized by an inherent ambiguity, a basic indeterminacy that shows itself in the various functions of the body, of which the sexual life is one. "When I move my hand towards a thing, I know implicitly that my arm unbends. When I move my eyes, I take account of their movement, without being expressly conscious of the fact" (169). Similarly sexuality, while not being the product of a conscious thought, underlies our lived experience and guides and contributes to the structure of our behavior. Sexual significance manifests itself in the whole manner of the body-subject (in the movements, voice, and inflections of tone) and the unification of the senses becomes obvious when we see something that is sexually arousing. This ambiguity is not some imperfection on the part of the body which somehow could become unambiguous through an act of Divine intervention. Existence is simply indeterminate, "in so far as it is the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning, whereby what had merely a sexual significance assumes a more general one, (and) chance is transformed into reason" (169). This 'transcendence' that Merleau-Ponty is in essence referring to is merely the name given to the body's capability to take a general existence and make sense of it as a de facto situation.

Existence as such is not built upon chance happenings that mean nothing to us. Sexuality is not therefore, "to be regarded as a fortuitous content of our experience" (169), but instead a characteristic like motility and intelligence, which is inseparable from the unified whole of being. "Every thing in man is a necessity" (170). We can imagine a person without hands, feet, or without sex, but these are merely abstractions that separates man from the living function of the body. It is important to notice here that Merleau-Ponty doesn't want his philosophy to regress into a listing of a priori categories, however: "we do not want to imagine, through any backward
looking illusion, any essential necessity, we point out an existential connection" (170). As the study of Schneider has shown, all aspects of existence are rigorously unified, and any attempt to isolate one of those aspects as being unnecessary or contingent will forever remain abstract. On the other hand, "everything in man is contingency;" (170) for example, not every child is born with equal capabilities, or guaranteed with an essential 'manner of existence'. There is no unconditioned possession of a certain way of living that we all share. "Man is an historical idea and not a natural species" (170): we don't all share the same instinctual devices, the same physiological make-up, in short there are no two beings-in-the-world that are the same. This is what gives us our unique, personal history.

In general, the whole conception of necessity and contingency must be rethought, because as body-subjects we neither leave behind our objectifiable body nor discard our subjectivity. Furthermore our incarnate existence can be neither reduced to a casing of bone and tissue, nor an absolute, translucent consciousness. We are not the mysterious combination of mind and matter as Descartes thought, but an existential figure which is necessarily both. What's more, as the study of the body in its sexual being has shown us, the manner in which we reveal meaning in our lives--transcendence--is a co-existence that projects itself in all aspects of our being and is irreducible to its individual parts.

The Body as Expression and Speech

Up till this point Merleau-Ponty has been arguing that when we examine closely our pre-reflective lived experience, we find that the body is not a system of externally related parts, but rather a certain synthesis of power, a unity, a spatiality, in short an intentionality that markedly differentiates it from earlier definitions posited by traditional philosophies. At the end of the last chapter we saw how sexual
significance brings to light the power of transcendence that is
the process the body uses to make things meaningful.
However, in order not to regress into the notion that this power
of transcendence, or intentionality of the body represents some
‘inner life’ of a positing consciousness, Merleau-Ponty
endeavors through this chapter to reconcile the relationship
between thought and body.

"The realization that speech is an originating realm
naturally comes late," (174) begins Merleau-Ponty. The natural
bias towards objectivity usually concedes that such things as
hearing and speaking (by way of one’s ears and vocal chords)
have everything to do with the body. The problem comes
when the "possession of language is...understood as no more
than the actual existence of ‘verbal images’, or traces left in us
by words spoken or heard" (174). If we continue along these
lines we find that there is no ‘speaking subject’, but only a
third person process whereby the mouth articulates thoughts
originating in, and defined by, a state of consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty once again refutes traditional approaches
by utilizing pathologically pertinent case studies. Psychologists
initially maintained that amnesia was due to the loss of certain
‘traces’ that were present somewhere in the brain (a la manière
de Lashley). Language thus was constituted by the possession
of ‘verbal images’ which were called up by a stimulus-response
circuit. However, as Merleau-Ponty states, “what the patient
has lost, and what the normal person possesses, is not a certain
stock of words, but a certain way of using them” (175). For
patients suffering from anarthria (the loss of power to
articulate speech) can produce the appropriate words and
phrases within the context of ‘concrete language’, but fail to
produce the same words in ‘gratuitous language’ or
extemporaneous speech. Most cases therefore, could not be
explained in terms of lost traces, or mental imagery. "There is
thus revealed, underlying the word, an attitude, a function of
speech which condition it" (175).
Psychologists further discovered amnesiac patients who could neither recall the name of colors before them, nor classify them if ordered to complete a certain task. Since the naming of something means “to tear oneself away from its individual and unique characteristics (and) see it as representative of an essence or category” (176), the problem seemed to lie in the patients being restricted to a certain ‘concrete attitude’ which made it impossible for them to transcend the color given and place it in some new category. Intellectualist theories hence postulated that language must depend on thought and aphasia must be attributable to some breakdown in the categorical operation. Words themselves were consequently seen as meaningless casings on internal thought, and language as a whole was simply a container for the meaningful thoughts of a thinking subject.

Merleau-Ponty points out in both cases (with the patients suffering from anarthria and those with color amnesia) there is a certain ‘kinship’ between explanatory theories. In the former case the ‘revival of the verbal image’ was what the patients could not do, and in the latter the patient was not able to envelop the authentic ‘inner process’ which produced speech. Implicit in both cases however, is the fact that ‘the word has no significance’. Neither theory is thus comprehensive, and empiricism remains perplexed by the patient’s ability to use certain words in concrete, but not gratuitous language, and intellectualism cannot explain why certain patients were able to distinguish colors while being unable to subsume them into certain categories. Merleau-Ponty contradicts both by simply stating that "the word has a meaning" (177).

To help him elucidate this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty points out how thoughts tend towards expression as their completion; in other words speech does not presuppose thinking. If speech presupposes thought there would be no way to explain why certain things appear unrecognizable until we’ve remembered their name, no matter how familiar the objects. Consequently, for Merleau-Ponty, naming is
recognition. In our experience of the denomination of objects, we do not in our mind have some concept under which we subsume the object. Instead, the name of the object itself is full of the meaning of the object for us, and as soon as the name is imposed upon the object by us, we become ‘conscious of reaching that object’. We ourselves sometimes don’t even know our thoughts until we have spoken or written them, like the author who begins a book without exactly knowing what the plot will eventually be. Hence it is evident that “speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it” (178).

If speech does not accomplish thought, how can one go about explaining the phenomenon of communication, or the human capability “to understand over and above what we may have spontaneously thought” (178). For in the end, communication is an illusion unless the listener receives the speaker’s thought from the speaker’s words themselves. There is a presupposition here that in order to understand someone, we must share a common language the origin of which possesses an immanent ‘gestural meaning’. To elucidate this point, Merleau-Ponty calls to our attention the phenomenon of saying and hearing something new. “The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking” (180); he neither visualizes a representation of the word spoken, nor needs to stop and think of the meaning of the word as he says it. He merely uses a common language to manifest his thought through speech. “In the same way the listener does not form concepts on the basis of signs” (180); there is no thinking on the listener’s part that runs parallel or counter to what’s being stated or read (provided that what’s being read or said is done so with expression). Listening is thinking—we understand the significance of what someone says as it unfolds and emerges. In this way both speaker and listener inhabit a shared linguistic world that is analogous to bodily space in the natural world: “I do not need to visualize external space and my own body in order to move one within the other” (180). In the
same way we communicate without having to visualize the word before using it, or hearing it. “[T]he word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment” (180); just as my hand, leg, or foot are accouterments of my bodily spatiality, so is communication an activity which realizes one of the potential uses of the body.

Each word is inhabited by an existential significance which is inseparable from the word itself, just as the “musical meaning of a sonata is inseparable from the sounds which are its vehicle” (182). As we showed earlier, ‘aesthetic expression’ is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, and the same is true for speech. Speech is no more an ‘outer covering’ of thought than are the individual notes in a musical piece or the brush-strokes on canvas merely external casings of the concerto or still life respectively. Speech, as well as music or painting, when successful, expresses a new significance which opens up vast possibilities for the listener or observer. What causes us to regard speech as a derivative of thought in-itself is a bit of ‘existential mimicry’ that is thought which has already been constituted by us and expressed at some time, but which we can silently recall and think about, or repeat any number of times. However, that which we call ‘pure’ thought is actually littered with words. ‘Inner life’ which was thought to be silent is really an ‘inner language’ that is filled with expressions of our own and others that we’ve picked up.

Unlike ‘first hand speech’ (which is used by the baby when it garbles out its first words, a lover revealing intimate feelings, or a writer who awakens an innovative experience), Merleau-Ponty states that most of our everyday speech and thought transpires in the realm of the ‘second order’, or that which has already been thought and spoken. Second order expression conceals from us originating thought by posing the illusion that the meaning of speech and speech itself can somehow be separated. If we want to appreciate originating speech therefore, we must become aware of the primordial,
first-order expression where most of our ‘regular’ speech arises.

As we stated before, for Merleau-Ponty a gestural meaning is immersed in speech such that “[t]he spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its” (183). Modern psychology effectively showed that the understanding of gestures does not rely on any type of recall, or personal recollection. Our experience shows that we do not interpret certain signs to understand a gesture. “The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself” (184). This is not to say however, that we understand the meaning of a gesture as we would an inanimate quality, like color. If gestures were given to us like things, we would be hard pressed to explain why humans can’t understand the gestures found in the animal kingdom, or what’s more why we fail to recognize the gestural significance belonging to different cultures. Gestures are not given, like physical phenomena, but rather they are understood through an intentional act on the spectator’s part. Communication and comprehension of gestures are thus the product of a certain reciprocity of intentions. “It is as if the other person’s intentions inhabited my body and mine his” (185). Both the other’s, and my own, intention is confirmed and manifested in the gesture itself. This is not some ‘act of intellectual interpretation’, but a pre-reflective, intersubjective dialogue between two persons: one gesture acts as a question, bringing to the dialogue ‘certain perceptible bits’ with which the other can concur, or remain ignorant of. “Communication is achieved when my conduct identifies this path (the other’s path of intentionality) with its own” (185). Communication is thus comparable to the perception of objects: for just as the meaning of any object perceived is never ‘beyond the perceptible spectacle’, so is “the meaning of a gesture...not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account” (186).
In order to understand the origin of language, Merleau-Ponty states that we must realize that the linguistic gesture, like any other, delineates its own meaning. Traditional analysis has made a habit of dividing gesture and speech by saying that the former is a ‘natural sign’ and the latter a ‘natural convention’. Accordingly, the connection between speech and meaning can be viewed as purely arbitrary, as one can see from the numerous languages in existence. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that if one looks merely at the conceptual aspect of a word, its meaning appears arbitrarily placed. However, if we delve into the emotional—what Merleau-Ponty has been calling the ‘gestural’—content of words, we find that they too are ‘pregnant with meaning’. In poetry for example, we can aver that words themselves do not represent any objective ideal, but rather express a certain emotional essence. The disparity between so many languages thus does not “represent so many arbitrary conventions for the expression of one and the same idea, but several ways for the human body to sing the world’s praises” (187). Hence the subtleties of one language—the ‘full meaning’—are never fully translatable: each language represents a unique way for a being-in-the-world to express itself.

Merleau-Ponty makes an important distinction by stating that each individual language is imbued with its own particular meaning: language is not the product of some natural phenomenon, nor is it a human convention. On the contrary, language finds its origin in “the emotional gesticulation whereby man superimposes on the given world the world according to man” (188). There is no ‘natural sign’ in humans, wherein a certain anatomical makeup produces a given response to a given state of mind. As Merleau-Ponty explains through a comparison between a Japanese and a westerner, “the difference of behavior corresponds to a difference in the emotions themselves” (189): the Japanese smiles in anger, while the westerner stomps his feet and goes red in the face. What is salient in this example is how each makes use of his
respective body, or the way in which the body and respective world are patterned through a specific emotion. Neither emotion, nor thought for that matter, is separable from the body, yet neither can be reduced to a specific, anatomical make-up. Thought and emotion must be considered as aspects of beings in the world, and the difference between the ways in which people think, speak, and express themselves testifies to the different ways a people perceive certain circumstances and respond to given situations. “It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love, than to call a table a table” (189). What this means of course is that the body doesn’t come equipped with a ready made, animalistic instinct that necessitates action: on the Trobriand Island for example, the concept of parenting is unheard of. This once again points to the essential ambiguity of the body which we’ve mentioned previously. In human existence everything is simultaneously ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’—such that everything from words to sexual behavior is dependent on a ‘purely biological being’ which at the same time transcends such a physiological entity. Man is thus defined by a sort of ‘genius for ambiguity’ where behavior is the thing that allows us to transcend a given situation while keeping in perspective its anatomical functioning as such. As Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere, nothing in human existence occurs by chance or is predetermined, and speech is no exception to that rule.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as he has revealed to us before, sets a specific place for speech within the realm of expression. Speech is essentially unique amongst other forms of expression as it is “able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for use in human relationships” (190). This uniqueness cannot be explained away on the account that speech can be written down, whereas gestures are directly imitated, for music can just as easily be written on paper. The individuality of language has to do with the notion that speech implants within us the ‘idea of truth’: speech loses sight of its own contingent side and provides the illusion of a thought
without words. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty says, for us speech has a ‘privileged position accorded to Reason’, but can only be understood if inserted back amongst the phenomena of bodily expression.

Once again, a return to pathology serves to elucidate the connection between thought and expression. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty comments that the works of Head, van Woerkom, Bouman, etc. unknowingly have created an ‘existential theory of aphasia’ in which language and thought are considered manifestations of one and the same projecting existence. We saw earlier that patients suffering from aphasia could no sooner name colors than put them into categories. Intellectualism of course deemed this a malfunction of the categorical activity which in turn signifies the disturbance of thought. Merleau-Ponty states that we can experience a similar phenomenon as that of the aphasics by taking on attitudes of ‘passive perception’, or one in which we cease to actively take note of the subtleties that differentiate one color from another. The existential theory of aphasia goes beyond any type of intellectualism by describing how the disorder has to do with the very manner in which the patient relates to the world, the style of the patient’s experience. The categorical activity the patient is to perform by grouping together like color samples is thus not a mere judgment, or spontaneous act, or even a primordial form of thought which is disturbed by some disorder. “For the patient...each of the samples is confined within its individual existence” (191). The categorical attitude is therefore something built up from a certain ‘setting of experience’ that is continuously defined by intentionality; and it is intentionality which disorders such as amnesia and aphasia effect, as patients afflicted with these have lost the living significance of words and their use.

Psychological studies have shown that many of the patients who are unable to categorize colors are able to repeat the color names and "retain in the highest degree the ability to associate ideas" (193). Once again we are pointed in the
direction of an existential significance in speech. In patients this significant connection between words and thoughts is severed, leaving them for example, only the names of colors which no longer signify anything. Once we understand what it is that patients lack, we can throw into relief what normal persons possess by way of incarnate intentionality. Unlike the psychologist’s patients, healthy persons exist as beings who are open to the perceptible world, and whose bodily intentionality enables them to discern the world’s significance. This pre-reflective intentionality also allows normal subjects to project around themselves a ‘mental’ or ‘cultural’ world that is not primordial, but borrow their structures from the basis of meaning which is the body-subject. Hence the linguistic gesture, like the perception of objects, is the normal person’s ‘taking up of a position’ according to meaningful phenomena: as bodily behavior for the normal subject ‘endows’ surrounding objects with a certain significance for themselves and others, so does speech bring about an inter-subjective ‘co-ordination of experience’. The power of speech is therefore not definable in terms of an act of intelligence, but instead speech is that primordial power of existence whereby we can transcend certain situations and project ourselves towards others in order to be understood.

As Merleau-Ponty shows, linguistic disorders take numerous forms, some affecting only the visual experience (such as alexia), while others only affect the verbal (such as paraphrasia). However, no matter what the disturbance, the meaning of language is always affected through some sort of incrementalization, or ossification of existence. For example with Schneider there is never any imagination of fantastic situations, there is no sexual initiative, and no language to describe what’s merely possible and not actual. In short “his experience never tends towards speech, it never suggests a question to him, it never ceases to have that kind of self-evidence and self-sufficiency of reality” (196).
Normal existence thus comes into contrast with a situation like Schneider’s as an openness of experience. The intention to speak, being a part of this openness, “makes its appearance...when, in the density of being, volumes of empty space are built up and move forwards” (196). And when thoughts are manifested thus through words, we find ourselves united to each other and to the world. Accordingly Merleau-Ponty makes the distinction between ‘speaking word’ and ‘spoken word’. The former signifies the nascent stages of a significant manifestation, like a newborn’s first utterances. The latter is enjoyed and utilized as one might with clothes. In other words it is the expression which, once created, has become a common possession from which new ‘speaking words’ will eternally evolve.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language requires a certain ambiguity that serves to define the body: “[t]he analysis of speech and expression brings home to us the enigmatic nature of our own body” (197). The body cannot be defined once and for all as some network of particles: the human being isn’t the product of causal relationships. What’s more, whereas speech and gestures were once considered to be transfigurations of the body that disclosed thoughts of the soul, Merleau-Ponty effectively points out that speech and gesture could never express thoughts unless the body itself was the incarnation of thought rather than merely being its external indicator. “It is the body which points out, and which speaks,” (197) not a transparent consciousness divorced from the world. The problem of understanding the world, and also our body is therefore recognized by admitting that everything to be understood ‘is all there’, right in our presence.

Sense experience

It has become clear that objective thought, a frame of thinking that is characteristic of both intellectualism and empiricism, misses the integral aspects of our perceptual
experience. "This is because (objective thought) presents itself with the world ready made, as the setting of every possible event and treats perception as one of these events" (207). An empirical explanation tells us on the one hand there exist stimuli external from the subject and on the other hand a perceiving subject that through 'genuine mental images' interprets the world. In this way the perceiving subject loses sight of the fact that he/she is doing the perceiving and instead attributes perception to the physicist's stimuli and the biologist's sense organs.

Likewise intellectualism carries the same prejudice of an objective world, only substituting a transcendental Ego for the mechanistic organism. Both philosophies admit of a bias by positing a world in-itself: intellectualism merely expands the empiricist's description of perception with the phrase 'consciousness of...'. Both philosophies cling to the same theorem: the world, the body, and the self exist in a web of 'causal relations spread out in the context of cosmic events'. Merleau-Ponty challenges this notion by asking how we could ever, if the empiricists and the intellectualists were correct, be confused with our body? If our mind actively transcended our empirical body, how could we ever not know why we were feeling nauseous, or not be able to describe in adequate terms how to play the piano well, for example. Beneath the physicist's stimuli, and the biologist's sense organs we therefore need to ascertain the immanent presence of a perceptual field, our contact with the world that is primordial to any objective thoughts we might possess. Our perceptual field (which is far more comprehensive than a field of view), is "a surface in contact with the world, a permanent rootedness in it," and we are capable of believing in the physicist's atom and the biologist's sense organs "because the world ceaselessly assails and beleaguer subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore" (207). In other words, pure subjectivity does not exist: rather our existence is one of connaturality and intersubjectivity that forms one end of a dialogue with a world
that is inseparable from us, and which we re-constitute and maintain at every moment. Since pure objectivity leaves our perceptual experience unaccounted for, and pure subjectivity remains a fancy myth, a middle ground must exist that doesn’t necessarily answer to a strict dualism. For perception to become understandable therefore, or ‘re-understood’ in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, we must initially realize that the body and self can never quite become isolable objects, and the notion of a transcendental Ego remains completely abstract.

Perception will always be overlooked as long as sensation remains either the empirical ‘state of consciousness’, or the intellectualist ‘consciousness of a state’. Inductive psychology for its part re-examines the notion of sensation by showing that it is neither a state or a quality, nor the consciousness of such a state or quality. It therefore finds much favor with Merleau-Ponty at this point and is accordingly used to elucidate what is being said about perception as a lived through experience. When psychologists studied patients who were diseased in the cerebellum or the frontal cortex, they found that alterations in the color of the patients’ visual field brought about subsequent changes in the patient’s arm movements. The smoothness, accuracy, and speed of the patients reaction movements varied according to the color which was presented. Furthermore, “[i]n these experiments each color always (acted) with the same tendency, with the result that a definite motor value (could) be assigned to it” (209). It is tempting to evoke a causal explanation to this phenomenon, but such a venture would be premature. For a color produced by ‘contrast’ consistently affords the same response as a color ‘defined in terms of (a) specific wavelength and intensity’. In general, colors are enveloped in a 'living significance', which produces in us a bodily reaction that is unique to a particular shade: "red and yellow favor abduction (by which is meant a turning away from the stimulus), blue and green adduction (a turning towards the stimulus). We find therefore that sensations are not reducible to certain states; on
the contrary sensations are wrapped up in a ‘motor physiognomy’ and are hence inseparable from meaning.

Just the same, colors do not gain their significance by means of a thinking subject. How does the intellectualist come to terms with the patient who reacts appropriately to a certain color without expressly being aware of it? If experience were constituted by a transcendental and transparent consciousness, it would seem by definition that any experience whose origin was ambiguous would not actually be an experience at all—which renders most behavior (even by the ‘normal subject’) incomprehensible. We must cease to look at sensations (of color) as an intellectual synthesis and recognize the body as sustaining all kinds of existential relationships with the ‘world’ which in turn supplies us with meaning.

Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of a sleeper to describe the relationships between the sentient and the sensible. He says “sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting” (211). A sleeper maintains a certain position, a regular breathing rate, and literally awaits the situation of sleep to overcome his being. In the same way I can shift my gaze, or reach out to touch something, expecting a sensation—and I’m not disappointed. For our bodies forever provide contact with the world, such that the ‘sensible’ is nothing more than a suggestion with which we ‘communicate’ as different ways of being in the world. Sensing here is neither a passive registering nor an active imposition of meaning upon an object. It is a pre-objective act, a co-existence with the world which we experience before the onset of an objective rationale.

If we ask ourselves where Merleau-Ponty is heading with this theory, the answer appears to be many-faceted and complex. But it seems that the impetus for his critique of traditional conceptions of sensation is to put the emphasis of sensation on the relationship between the sentient and the sensible. The triumph of his chapter on ‘the body as object and mechanistic physiology’ was to find the middle term between
the for-itself and the in-itself (which was called a being-in-the-world, or a body-subject). We find that the problem that was addressed then is evident here with the discussion concerning sensations. For if we adhere to an intellectualist position, "being is exclusively for someone who is able to step back from it and thus stand wholly outside being" (212): according to this notion, one does not actually see through the eyes, nor hear through the ears, but extricates oneself from the actual sensible experience in order 'to lay siege' on the experience in thought. Hence the problem of the for-itself and the in-itself must be once again re-examined, Merleau-Ponty recapitulates. Only by doing this can we come to terms with the immanent significance that is alive through our relationship with the world. The color blue for example is not a quale as such, but a directional intentionality which can express a certain significant aspect of the world to me if my gaze falls on it. More than anything else, it must be realized that to sense something means involving oneself in a relationship that sees the sensed and the sentient not as 'mutually external terms' (the actor and the acted upon), but as the unification of questioner and responder. "[A] sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for the body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate" (214). It is only in this 'problem' between the sensible and sensor that significance is manifested, and subsequently the place to which a radical reflection needs to take us.

For an example, Merleau-Ponty asks us to consider the sky: "[a]s I contemplate the blue sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue...I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery" (214). But how exactly is this different from the intellectualist consciousness? How can we be completely overcome by our perception of the blueness of the sky and yet maintain a differentiation between 'sensible consciousness' and 'intellectualist consciousness'? Two
responses are given: the first is that every perception is presented ‘anonymously’ and is accompanied by an air of generality. It is true that our bodies are adapted for the sensible world, but it is just as true that the activity of sensation takes place on the ‘periphery of (our) being’. In other words, sensation is ‘pre-personal’ like our births and deaths, in the sense that it is anterior, and presupposed by our everyday existence.

The second reason, and the reason why we can talk about sensation as being anonymous, is that it is forever limited, or perspectival. “[A]round what I am looking at at a given moment is spread a horizon of things which are not seen, or which are even invisible” (217). Going back to the example of a house that Merleau-Ponty used before, when I look at the walls of a house, I always feel that there is a portion of the house, namely the piping and heating vents etc., beyond what I’m seeing at this very moment.

The subject of sensation is thus not the personal self that decides to study mathematics, or interpret a certain book in a certain way. It is a pre-personal body that has its own momentum of existence and whose varying senses are themselves ‘so many natural selves’. Accordingly a name can be defined as ‘a thought subordinated to a certain field’; sensations have access to the sensible only in a certain field, and we can discover these ‘aspects of being’ with the knowledge that we ourselves played no part in the constitution of that experience.

As we have seen, intellectualism subordinates everything to a constituting consciousness, and sensations naturally have the same fate. It further posits space as the ‘form of objectivity’ or that means whereby a consciousness becomes possible. Knowledge is thus always knowledge of objects, and the senses are necessarily attuned to the same all-embracing space that affords us the opportunity to posit ‘true being’. For its part empiricism could not successfully refute such a deduction; for any experiment that postulates that the senses
are separable, and not all spatial, presupposes that the allegedly 'pure data' of the senses can be separated out from "a total experience in which they are ultimately indiscernible" (218). Therefore any conclusions drawn about the 'spatiality of the senses' will have to be answered at the level of reflection.

There are two types of reflection possible here: the intellectualist and Merleau-Ponty's aforementioned 'radical reflection'. As we have seen, traditional intellectualist reflection posits a thematizing consciousness, which leads to an existence for-itself for subjects, and an existence in-itself for objects. But why should we assume that such a relationship between subject and object is possible? The response might be that "there is no reason to ask whence I derive these ideas of subject and object, since they are simply the formulation of those conditions without which nothing would exist for anybody" (219). But such an answer is unsatisfactory, in light of the exposed shortcomings of intellectualism that Merleau-Ponty has mentioned. A new reflection is therefore needed that doesn't rely on the acceptability of unanswerable questions, and is radical enough to re-direct our reflections onto the pre-objective experience of the body.

Merleau-Ponty defines his radical reflection as that which "takes hold of me as I am in the act of forming and formulating the ideas of subject and object, and brings to light the source of these two ideas; it is reflection, not only in operation, but conscious of itself in operation" (219). We must thereby not begin with the presumptive subject/object dichotomy, but rather with the pre-reflective experience that is not characterized by a system of deterministic relations. There is no such thing as an absolute subjectivity or an absolute objectivity, as we have shown again and again; there only exists a 'primordial layer' between subject and object that affords the coming into being of both things and ideas.

Kant gave us time and space as a priori categories without which knowledge cannot exist. This a priori knowledge, according to Kant, was knowledge that could exist
independently of experience and be discovered through reflection. However, Merleau-Ponty challenges the idea that any knowledge can exist independently of the world and experience. Radical reflection transforms these *a priori* therefore by describing the human experience as something completely wrapped up in the world, and not constituting the world through rational thought. Kant maintained that *a priori*, or what must necessarily be, are not recognizable in 'advance of experience', that is, outside of our 'factual' being; but Kant still clung to the notion that a universal and necessary knowledge existed within us that could not be experienced through the empirical body. As the experience of the phenomenal world is the foundation of knowledge, Merleau-Ponty therefore suggests some new definitions for *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge: the former is 'the fact understood, made explicit, and followed through into all the consequences of its latent logic', and the latter is 'the isolated and implicit fact' (221); with this redefining of the terms comes the abandoning of the traditional view of content and form and the adhering to the belief that any knowledge existing independently of existence is an impossibility. Radical reflection thus realizes our inheritance in being, and recognizes that "our experience is the experience of the world" (221).

A major part of the commentary on sensory experience deals with the abolition of traditional approaches to content and form, as was just mentioned. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty wants to describe our rootedness in existence as a 'comprehensive configuration which is the one and only space', the senses being merely different structures of this single unity. Since the senses are all aspects of being-in-the-world we can shift our focus from one to the other and back again without ever losing our 'connaturality' with the world. Hence in the concert hall we can close our eyes and imagine we are actually riding with the Valkyries; naturally when our eyes open again the space we see in the concert hall feels comparatively small to the auditory space experienced
moments before. In the same way patients blind from birth are opened to an entirely new world after their cataracts have been removed. No longer is the patient confined to the limited realm of tactile and auditory space that he/she had grown accustomed to. "The patient never ceases to marvel at this visual space to which he has just gained access, and compared to which tactile experience seems to him so poor that he is quite prepared to admit that he never enjoyed the experience of space before the operation" (222). After the operation, the patient reaches out his hand to grasp any object placed in front of him, including a sunbeam. Therefore tactile experience must be spatial--otherwise the patient wouldn’t reach out his hand at all. Granted, touch is ‘not spatial as is sight’, nor is sight spatial as is hearing. Even though we recognize the unique spatiality of each sense, it is only through their interplay that we can understand the unity of space, thereby extricating our lived through experience from the confines of traditional form and content pedagogies. In normal perception then, the senses are distinct from each other, they explore objects in their own way, but they co-exist and interact on a pre-reflective level such that their contribution to our perception of space becomes indistinguishable in the structure of a body-subject.

Until this point Merleau-Ponty has not made a clear distinction between sensation and perception; as we've mentioned before however, there are marked differences between the two concepts. Sensory experience is essentially foreign to natural perception and is ‘unstable’, as it takes a highly particularized attitude to experience one of the senses as separated from the others. Such an attitude however, makes us oblivious to the ‘primary layer’ of sensation which is anterior to any analysis. Two sheets of paper, one in the light and one partially obstructed by a shadow, appear equally white unless we adopt a “second order critical vision which tries to know itself in it’s own particularity” (226). The sensible quality, or rather noticing the differentiation of the shadowed and non-shadowed paper, only appears when we ask
ourselves precisely what it is that we see, and does not occur in our normal interaction between our gaze qua living (and lived) vision and the world. Unlike pre-reflective sense experience, which is characterized when we feel a color fully pervading our body, or the sound from an instrument ‘becoming our being’, the sensible quality attained through a critical reflection atomizes the world and breaks up the ‘natural unity of the perceiving subject’. Synaesthetic perception is therefore the rule: under the influence of mescaline (a hallucinogenic drug) for example, the subject’s ‘attitude of impartiality’ is weakened, thereby emphasizing the colors given off by the sounds from an instrument, of the tick of the metronome. If we insist on retaining the constancy hypothesis which “allows to each stimulus one sensation and only one” (228), the entire experience becomes incomprehensible. But we must account for the experience, because it isn’t only subjects influenced by mescaline that experience synaesthesia. We all do, but have been lead astray by the current biases of scientific thought that reject the notion that such perception indeed occurs.

If we place in abeyance our natural prejudice in favor of an objective world, we discover that the senses intercommunicate with each other “by opening up on to the structure of the thing” (229). When we consider for example the shattering of glass, the ductility of red-hot steel, the resilience of the fold in a linen cloth, or the flexibility of a tree-branch, we realize that form is not merely the geometrical outline of the shape of the object. Rather the form of an object is indicative of a certain specific nature which appeals to all the senses simultaneously, and reveals the ‘inner structure’ of the thing perceived. Put differently, objects afford their structure to (every) perception. However, we must refrain from reducing the object’s essential nature to a Kantian category. For the perceptual synthesis which accomplishes the unification of our sensory experience is fundamentally disparate from the intellectual synthesis championed by Kant.
The perceptual synthesis Merleau-Ponty talks about can be thought of as analogous to the way that ‘binocular vision grasps one sole object’. When our gaze is fixed in the distance for example, we see a double image of things that are close. When our gaze subsequently shifts to the nearby object, the two images merge and we see one object. Binocular vision is therefore not an automatic physiological process, nor is it a mental synthesis: “if we were dealing with a mental act...this (merging of images) ought to occur as soon as I notice the identity of the two images, whereas I have to wait much longer for the unity of the object to appear” (231). The convergence of two monocular images into the object seen is therefore an act of bodily intentionality. We pass from double vision to the single object only when the eyes cease to exist independently, and are instead used as a single organ by the phenomenal body. This unity by reason of intentionality is by no means an epistemological act of a transparent consciousness. The perceptual synthesis is rooted in the “prelogical unity of the bodily schema’, and no more has the corner on an explicit knowledge of the body itself, than is does of the object seen. As stated before, there will always be a certain ambiguity involved in perception; for if the thing itself was actually ‘reached’, there would be nothing about it that wasn’t specifically known. The central distinction between the perceptual and intellectual synthesis is therefore as follows: an intellectual synthesis believes that on passing from double to normal vision we are expressly aware of seeing the same object with our eyes. A perceptual synthesis believes that our awareness is of a ‘progressing towards the object itself and finally enjoying its concrete presence’ (233).

Applying his theory to the senses, Merleau-Ponty notes that “the intersensory object is to the visual object what the visual object is to the monocular images of double vision” (234). The body is a ‘synergic system’, ‘the congealed face of existence’, where the hearing of sounds, of the seeing of colors is no more (or less) remarkable than experiencing a unified
gaze from two eyes: both are functions of a body-subject. To help elucidate the unity of the senses, Merleau-Ponty uses the example of watching a ‘dubbed’ film. When the sound is momentarily cut from the film, one does not simply lose the spoken text. Rather, ‘the whole spectacle itself is changed’; faces lose their expression, bodily motions seem lifeless, in short meaning seems to have been extracted form the scene in general. The body is the ‘very actuality of the phenomenon of expression’, and when one of the phenomena of expression is extracted, perception loses its immanent meaning and unity.

Just as my phenomenal body gives significance to natural objects, so to does it give meaning to objects endemic to a certain culture, like language. For example, in experiments where subjects are briefly shown words to be read, a bodily attitude is adopted that corresponds to the word shown. If the word ‘warm’ is flashed, the subject becomes a bit flushed, and begins to perspire. Words are thus indistinguishable from the attitude which they may motivate. Correspondingly, the body shouldn’t be viewed as a ‘nexus of sensible qualities’ but rather that which is sensitive to all objects, including words. The body thus symbolizes the world, and is what allows us to ‘be at home’ in, or understand the world before a critical reflection is utilized.

We must get away from thinking that consciousness is nothing until something enters it; we do not exist as tabula rasa. “If my consciousness were at present constituting the world while it perceives, no distance would separate them and there would be no possible discrepancy between them” (238). We know well by now that this isn’t the case--our existence is not primarily notional. Perception always possesses a horizon of ambiguity. What we do perceive, and are therefore conscious of, are objects which are ‘inexhaustible’, never fully understood. Furthermore, the person who perceives is an ‘historical density’; in other words, the accomplishment of the perceptual synthesis includes a temporal aspect, in which the past and the future are unified with the present through the
body as subject. Perception is at all times prospective, in that the object is the final outcome of an act of focusing, and retrospective, since the object will present itself as already having been there. By doing this, by holding on to a past and future horizon, the body creates time instead of submitting itself to it.

It must be understood finally, what it means that perception is impersonal. "The person who, in sensory exploration, gives a past to the present and directs it towards a future, is not myself as an autonomous subject, but myself in so far as I have a body and am able to look" (240). This is the way a 'prehistory' is created in us, and is consequently the essence of time: without the depth of a past, and the immanence of a future, the present would lose its 'thisness' and 'richness', and fall away into nothingness. This is also why Merleau-Ponty cannot conceive of thinking in terms of absolute subjectivity. As humans we exist more along the lines of the dialectical, always progressing as a simultaneity of constituted and constituting. If we are to appreciate the impersonal nature of perception therefore, we must give up the critical attitude that distances sensation from the subject, only to have the latter confront sensations without content. A truly radical reflection thus consists of 'recovering the unreflective experience of the world', where nothing has yet been thematized, and subject and object have not yet been posited. A radical reflection recognizes sensation as 'the most rudimentary of perceptions', and restores it to the perceptual field, while reinstating "primary perception (as) a non-thetic, pre-objective, and pre-conscious experience" (242).

Conclusion and philosophical implications

Merleau-Ponty's contribution to phenomenology is often overshadowed by the more voluminous works of his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, the similar works of Martin Heidegger, and the works of the 'founder' of phenomenology--Edmund Husserl. It is further noted by many that Merleau-Ponty's work is considered incomplete, lacking explanations of culture, language, intersubjectivity, and truth, due to the philosopher's untimely death in 1961. Despite these facts Merleau-Ponty's unique discoveries and influence remain a must for any perceptual theorist or phenomenologist.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Merleau-Ponty's self-proclaimed triumph was the "re-discovery" of a body-subject that was able to shed some light on the hopeless mind/body dichotomy made by Descartes. In the body-subject we find a conscious life that is always already subtended by, but irreducible to, a primordial, bodily connaturalism with the world. The difficulty I found with Merleau-Ponty was coming to terms with these two levels of existence--the conscious and the pre-conscious--and the idea that it is on this pre-objective, pre-reflective level that significance with the world and other people is initially apprehended. But just as significance is bodily and pre-conscious, so is existence characterized by an ek-stase or active transcendence that takes hold of our perspectival meaning as it comes into being. This coming of being into consciousness, or coming into existence of meaning, is subsequently what serves to define the term "phenomenology."

To define the other important term in the title--"perception"--according to Merleau-Ponty is somewhat more challenging, as the philosopher himself never expressly addresses what the concept positively means. In general terms, of course, perception is the dialectic relationship the body shares with the world as characterized for example by sexuality and a primary level of sensation that is anterior to classical definitions. Perception is not an intellectual synthesis in which a consciousness posits a world as it would a geometrical truth, nor is it the picking up and interpretation of an
objective, external world. As Merleau-Ponty says, perception is a 'practical synthesis' that places a body-subject in the presence of the world.

If I look at a cube, for example, I don't consider the unseen sides representations, or necessary conclusions of any kind of analytic reasoning. The unseen sides are present to me because they are in my vicinity, I can reach out my hands and grasp them, in short I am in a space with the cube and perceive its presence directly without having to judge or intellectually synthesize its size or shape. This practical synthesis is also temporal as the subject who perceives builds up and unfolds time with every present moment.

Looking at the title of this book therefore, we find that Merleau-Ponty's main goal in writing the *Phenomenology of Perception* is to return our basic relationship with the world back to its rightful, primordial place. This 'return to things themselves' is not so much a rejection of other forms of thought (science for example), as a delegating of certain attitudes to their rightful place as a second-order experiences. Throughout the text it is evident that Merleau-Ponty has had a good deal of training in the natural sciences. His phenomenology consequently seems not so much a widening of the gap between philosophy and science, as it is pointing out of the intrinsic connection between the two. However, it is also evident that Merleau-Ponty is extremely unsympathetic to scientism, or the theory concerned with the objectification of the world for purposes of study. An attitude of scientism completely misses the built up, and lived through nature of our experience. A good example of the rejection of scientism comes in the chapter concerning classical psychology: according to Merleau-Ponty, the classical psychologists had the right ideas about the distinction between the body and objects but because of a commitment to scientism (or a commitment to the attitude of impartial observer), they overlooked the fact that it was their own subjective experience being studied, and therefore failed to realize the phenomenological implications of their studies.

As I mentioned earlier a study of Merleau-Ponty's unique approach to perception remains a must for any aspiring
phenomenologist. The question to be asked is, "Why?" In general, what contribution has Merleau-Ponty made to the study of perception and the larger realm of philosophical thought? I've answered this in the form of several categories that draw both from personal conclusions as well as from the context of related academic disciplines.

Clarity through ambiguity Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has often been called one of ambiguity, which might seem to indicate a certain difficulty in understanding exactly what is being said by the philosopher. While Merleau-Ponty's style remains challenging, the term "ambiguity" when applied to Merleau-Ponty refers to the pre-personal existence of the body which cannot be explicitly known or described, and from which meaning is derived. Granted, Merleau-Ponty tends to be rather verbose in his descriptions, but conceptually he is attempting to return to things themselves, attempting to make clear and simple the lived through existence which is our ambiguous bodily being.

Intersubjective co-existence One of the most important criticisms Merleau-Ponty levied against empiricism and intellectualism was that of the "unknowable" transparent consciousness. According to traditional prejudices there had to be a transcendental ego that either translated certain internal forms or interpreted a world in-itself. The problem of knowing another consciousness (another person) became impossible as the only aspect of any body that was visible was the meaningless physiological shell. This problem disappears with Merleau-Ponty, however, as the expression of bodily existence is inseparable from the thing expressed: others' mental life is directly accessible to us in the unfolding of their behavior. We don't infer through some act of introspection someone's state of consciousness; rather their bodily being is imbued with an immanent significance which is immediately communicable. Once we reject the nature of a transcendental ego the body ceases to be a merely external matter and becomes the vehicle which makes other people present to us in living experience.

Far too often (and it appears that Merleau-Ponty would criticize empiricism and intellectualism of the same thing),
philosophies isolate the thinker in a private, abstract world that focuses on thoughts rather than reality. Our experience on the contrary shows us that such isolation is not desirable (maybe not even possible). We exist in a world where we necessarily communicate and co-exist with others. Part of the beauty of Merleau-Ponty's return to phenomena is therefore a return to intersubjectivity and the realization that at least part of the understanding of ourselves comes through an understanding of those around us.

Merleau-Ponty and Freud Right away in his chapter on the body as sexual being we find that Merleau-Ponty agrees with the lasting tenets of psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly Freud plays a significant role in Merleau-Ponty's thought. We find out exactly what this relationship is in Merleau-Ponty's article entitled Cezanne's Doubt. Basically Merleau-Ponty argues that despite Freud's shortcomings (specifically his seemingly arbitrary explanations of dreams), the merits of psychoanalytic intuition itself cannot be denied. Merleau-Ponty argues that psychoanalysis was never meant to give causal explanations like the natural sciences were. Psychoanalysis merely gives motivational relationships between the past and present: to the present situation, the past acts as a basic dimension which doesn't cause any particular acts, but which can be seen in all. In short psychoanalysis argues that we can never be absolutely free. We always already have with us, in the form of our body, a lived-through existence which serves to motivate our current behavior.

Freud also spoke of a "sexual instinct", which on the surface would imply a ready-made pattern of sexual action that operates necessarily in certain situations. Such a conception of Freud is misleading, however, for Freud's "sexual instinct" is polymorphous, and situates itself according to age and circumstance. There is no question here of a thing-like reality, nor for that matter of a conscious act. It thus becomes evident that Freud's "sexual instinct" has certain undeniable similarities to Merleau-Ponty's body subject, and the latter's theory on bodily sexuality.
Merleau-Ponty and Marx  It is well known that Merleau-Ponty had certain sympathies for Marxism, as he and Sartre became the main contributors to Les temp modernes, a magazine with obvious Marxist leanings. However, Merleau-Ponty's actual contact with Marxism came in the form of a Marxist orthodoxy preached over the whole world under the direction of a powerful center. As he thought this an absolutized way of thinking, Merleau-Ponty rejected Marxist orthodoxy outright, although remaining faithful to some of the "authentic" Marxist ideas. For example Merleau-Ponty admires Marx's struggle against idealism and realism. He also sees Marx as having been a structuralist (akin to his own belief in the primacy of the gestalt), where all ideas are valid only within a certain structure. Further (and probably most importantly), like Merleau-Ponty, Marx places an understanding of the present in the context of a historical development of meaning. Marx also sees humans and the world as inseparable, much like Merleau-Ponty does.

In all honesty, though, there are some fundamental differences which render Marx and Merleau-Ponty ultimately irreconcilable. For one, Marx presupposes a constituting consciousness in humans. Although he and Merleau-Ponty ostensibly share ideas concerning the primacy of the material world, the human being according to Marx will forever be more subjective than Merleau-Ponty would be willing to admit to. Also Marx argued that economics was the primary determining force of history. Merleau-Ponty would admit that economics is a part of history, but inseparable from the other forces of history such as religion and culture (in general social existence) that equally serve to motivate the present situation.

Merleau-Ponty and Realism?  Strange as it may seem, it appears that Merleau-Ponty shares some common ideas with a realist, albeit a radical one, James J. Gibson. Gibson, like Merleau-Ponty, starts out by criticizing traditional theories (empiricism and rationalism), and shows the mistake of considering sensations as the basis of perception. Like Merleau-Ponty, Gibson speaks of a phenomenal unity of objects, insofar as we perceive the latter as having existed before we observe them and continuing to exist after we stop observing them. Especially interesting to a Merleau-Pontian
analysis is Gibson's idea of affordances, in which subjects directly perceive the practical aspects or characteristics of objects. To put it differently, objects directly afford their structure to us through the act of perception. Similarly Merleau-Ponty speaks about how the primary layer of sensation opens us to the actual structure of a thing: "one sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings" (229). It seems thus that both Merleau-Ponty and Gibson would therefore argue in favor of a direct apprehension of the phenomenal structure of an object.

There are some important differences between Merleau-Ponty and Gibson however. Gibson, although admitting of a direct theory of perception, still attributes perception to what he calls perceptual systems, which can be defined physiologically. These perceptual systems aren't merely the senses (on the contrary it is this notion that Gibson argues against), but they are still definable according to the body's anatomical make-up. Also in his *Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Gibson outlines certain characteristics inherent in the land which offer us information to be picked up and differentiated. Speaking for Merleau-Ponty, this idea of information in the land that we pick-up seems alarmingly close to admitting of an objective world. Hence Gibson's argument, if interpreted as admitting of an objective world, would find the same difficulty with Merleau-Ponty that the Gestalt psychologists did (that is leaving the subject out of the meaning-giving situation). In the end Gibson and Merleau-Ponty should probably remain in separate camps (despite some similar ideas), as the former condones a "common sense" approach to perception and the latter understands perceptual significance only in terms of an irreducible subject-world dialogue.

As we can see, Merleau-Ponty's thought has been influenced by many and remains salient in current theoretical debates. In all honesty he will probably never receive the recognition of his longer-lived philosophical contemporaries. Likewise the difficulty of his texts will probably keep him out of most psychology classrooms. Regardless, his approach to a bodily theory of perception offers
fresh insight to a field of study that is notoriously muddled with abstraction.
Bibliography


