

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION



MAURICE
MERLEAU-PONTY

Phenomenology of Perception

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

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

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

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

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

Translated by Donald A. Landes.

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

Praise for this new edition:

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

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

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

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

Review of the original French edition:

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

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

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FOREWORD

Taylor Carman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Donald A. Landes

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

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

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

– Jean-Paul Sartre²

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

turned back upon itself and began to express something, to manifest an interior being externally.”²⁵

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

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

Having attended Husserl's lectures in Paris in 1929²⁹ and having alluded to some of the central tenets of Husserl's work in his 1934 proposal, Merleau-Ponty was certainly familiar with phenomenology prior to setting to work on *Phenomenology of Perception* after 1938.³⁰ And yet, as Théodore Geraets observes, this familiarity would significantly deepen thanks to two events in the pivotal year of 1939. First, a special edition of the *Revue internationale de philosophie* was published in honor of Husserl, who

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

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

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

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

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

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

Preface

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

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

Introduction: Classical Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena

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

an "undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual 'jolt,'"⁴⁴ but is always a figure against a background, always charged with a *sense*, and, unlike the determinate world described by science, perception requires that we "recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon."⁴⁵

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

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

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

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

Part One: The Body

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part Two: The Perceived World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES ON THIS TRANSLATION

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

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

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

TRANSLATION DECISIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRANSLATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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

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

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 - ii. *Le monde se profile, mais n'est pas posé par une synthèse d'entendement.*
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