

World, Body and Perception in Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

(Tělo, svět a vnímání ve filosofii Merleau-Pontyho)

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is (1) to present a general picture of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, (2) to identify and describe the most fundamental features of his phenomenology, and (3) to explain his view of the relationship between humans and the world. To do this, I use mainly Merleau-Ponty's most well-known book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and to a lesser degree his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). My interpretative approach is heavily influenced by Hubert Dreyfus' reading of Merleau-Ponty, as he presents it in his series of lectures dedicated this thinker. The central feature of this line of interpretation is that it situates Merleau-Ponty into a Heideggerian framework. In the picture which this thesis presents, Merleau-Ponty considers subject and object not to be basic ontological categories, but derivative of a more fundamental reality, a deeper domain of experience where the inner and the outer intermingle and intertwine so it is impossible to say to what degree is one active and the other passive, or even where one ends and the other begins. In the reading I present here, at the bottom of this experiential milieu there is an unceasing striving towards an organization which is most conducive towards optimal coping with the environment, or towards maximum (or optimal) grip, to use the term which Dreyfus coined for it.

Účelem této práce je (1) zprostředkovat obecnou představu o filosofii Merleau-Pontyho, (2) identifikovat a popsat centrální rysy jeho fenomenologie a (3) vysvětlit jeho představu o vztahu mezi lidmi a světem. K těmto účelům vycházím především z Merleau-Pontyho nejslavnější knihy *Fenomenologie vnímání* (1945) a v menší míře z jeho nedokončeného manuskriptu *Viditelné a neviditelné* (1964). Můj interpretační rámec je silně ovlivněn přístupem Huberta Dreyfuse, jak ho předkládá ve své sérii přednášek. Definičním rysem tohoto přístupu je, že zasazuje Merleau-Pontyho do Heideggerovského rámce. V obraze, který v této tezi předkládám, Merleau-Ponty nepovažuje subjekt a objekt za základní ontologické kategorie, ale za pojmy odvozené ze základnějšího rozměru lidské existence, kde se vnitřek a vnějšek prolínají, takže je nemožné říci, do jaké míry je jeden činný a druhý trpný, nebo dokonce kde jeden končí a druhý začíná. Podle interpretace, kterou zde zastávám, je základním rysem tohoto pole zkušenosti, ve kterém člověk přichází do nezprostředkovaného kontaktu se světem, neustálé úsilí organizovat se takovým způsobem, který umožní organizmu co nejoptimálněji interagovat se svým okolím.

Key words: Merleau-Ponty, Hubert Dreyfus, Phenomenology of Perception, body schema, phenomenal field, chiasm, flesh

Klíčová slova: Merleau-Ponty, Hubert Dreyfus, Fenomenologie vnímání, tělesné schéma, fenomenální pole, chiasmus, tělesnost

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I hope to do three things. Firstly, to provide a general overview of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole. Secondly, to introduce Merleau-Ponty's peculiar brand of phenomenology, that is, to identify and explain its most central features. Finally, I would then like to use this analysis to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of what I'm going to call the Cartesian framework (the two defining features of which are subject-object ontology and mediational epistemology) and to present the alternative framework which Merleau-Ponty intends as its replacement. I'm going to be drawing primarily on (the English version of) his most famous book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and, in the last chapter, from his unfinished, posthumously published manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), where he puts forth his most mature and thought-through account of the relation between humans and the world. I'm also going to be strongly relying on the interpretative framework developed by Hubert Dreyfus (as he presents it in his series of 31 lectures on Merleau-Ponty, available on Youtube). The rationale for the choice of this particular interpretative approach as opposed to any other is not really that it is the deepest in meaning or the closest to Merleau-Ponty's own intentions, although it might be. I choose it simply because it is readily accessible and easily digestible and thus provides an ideal entry point into the system of this difficult yet highly interesting and rewarding thinker. The intention of this thesis is not to really lay out any novel views on the topic, my hope is rather that this broad overview might serve me, and perhaps somebody else, as the grounds for deeper and more meticulous engagement.

The body of this thesis is divided into three parts. In the first, I attempt to situate Merleau-Ponty into broader historical and intellectual context and to roughly sketch out the aims, methods and basic characteristics of his project. Having provided this minimal grounding, in the second part I will then try to lay out what I understand to be the defining features of Merleau-Ponty's views of the relationship between humans and their environment (that is, of the structures of the phenomenal field). In the final part, I will then use this analysis to make sense of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the Cartesian framework and explain what he wants to replace it with.

I will be making use of two abbreviations for purposes of citation: PP for *Phenomenology of Perception* and V&I for *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Part I: Preliminary Issues

2. Framing the Discussion

Merleau-Ponty's influence, although greater than commonly assumed, certainly cannot rival that of giants like Sartre, Wittgenstein, or Foucault, who managed to escape the philosophical sandbox and become common objects of conversation across all manners of intellectual circles. His texts are quite difficult to understand and demand a considerable investment of time and energy even from a philosophically literate reader, so the ideas they contain do not readily disseminate into the fields which might profit by them. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty was a highly original and refreshing thinker with an insight into the structures human experience that was rarely matched and I hope to convince the reader that his books can stand toe to toe with any of the usually recognized classics of 20th century philosophy.

It seems somewhat misleading to label Merleau-Ponty simply as a philosopher since he was also and in equal measure a psychologist. During his lifetime, he held the most prestigious academic positions in both fields¹ and his books present an elegant balance of the two. His ability to move fluently between these two worlds enabled him to blend them into a seamless unity where one makes up for the shortcomings of the other: philosophy, or more concretely phenomenology, supplying fundamental framework and methodological rigor while psychology, and in particular Gestalt psychology, contributes understanding of psychic processes obtained from years of in-field research. The resulting system is a perfect marriage of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology which reaches higher than either could on its own. There are of course other influences patent in his writing besides phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Merleau-Ponty was remarkably well read and up to speed with all the heteromorphic streams of thought that were in vogue in his day like Marxism, semiotics, psychoanalysis or Bergsonism as well as with the constantly advancing frontier of scientific research. He was also at home in the world of art and literature, from which he draws illustrative examples to support theories. Notable here would be Proust, Claudel, Valéry², and most importantly, Cezanne. Although these influences certainly played an important role in shaping Merleau-Ponty's thought, I'll be leaving them for the purposes of this thesis aside, and I will, as a reasonable simplification, present Merleau-Ponty's system as a fusion of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology which hold by far the most prominent place in his understanding of the structures of experience and the human-world relationship.

3. Gestalt Psychology

The contributions of Gestalt psychology to Merleau-Ponty's system are relatively straight forward. Merleau-Ponty was intimately familiar with works of the foremost personages of the Gestalt movement like Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, as is clear from his frequent and pertinent use of citations (in *Phenomenology of Perception* and elsewhere).

¹ 1948 – professor of psychology in University of Lyon, 1949 – professor of child psychology and pedagogy at University of Paris, 1952 – professor of philosophy at College de France (he was the youngest person ever to hold this post)

² From whom Merleau-Ponty got the concept of chiasm.

Before Merleau-Ponty came around, these were the best there were when it came to observing and providing descriptions of the structures of human psyche, so he naturally often uses their research as a starting point and source of valuable insights. Their descriptive analysis of perception and the concept of Gestalt³ especially come to play a central role in his own descriptions of human experience. But however keen observers of phenomena the Gestaltists may have been, they never could have provided a completely faithful description of the structures of human experience since they were still stuck in the old, inadequate Cartesian framework.⁴ They lacked the methodological rigor and the capacity for reflection necessary to make explicit, reevaluate, and consequently reject their silent presuppositions, which under close scrutiny turn out to clash with the actual experience. They saw the phenomena but were unable to work themselves out of the old, insufficient picture that held the western tradition captive at least since the time of Descartes (and probably long before that). The phenomena demand a decisive step beyond the subject object ontology and, correlatively, mediational epistemology, but something like that takes a philosopher. The inability to step outside of the Cartesian picture was however only the most prominent of the hurdles that hindered the Gestaltists. In their descriptions, they make use of all kinds of tacit assumptions which Merleau-Ponty then unearths, considers, and, after finding them unwarranted, rejects. He then proceeds to restate the insights of the Gestaltists in a framework which is more adequate for the job, that is, doesn't distort the phenomena. One more important example of these unexamined assumptions is what Merleau-Ponty calls the "naturalism" of the Gestaltists, their tacit assent to the "prejudice of the world", that is, their conviction that the world of objects exists as a ready-made and fully present reality. As we shall see, this assumption, although perfectly natural and for a non-philosopher so obvious it never even reaches conscious articulation, is untenable.

To sum up, the Gestaltists were keen observers of human experience, they saw the phenomena but were unable to give them faithful expression since they operated from within an insufficient picture of human beings and their place in the world. What is then needed is to reject this old picture and find a better one in which it will be possible to reformulate these insights of the Gestaltists. This, as you may have guessed, is where the other big influence on Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, enters the picture.

4. Phenomenology

When it comes to the place of phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's system, the matter is more complicated since while there is only one Gestalt psychology, there are many phenomenologies. Every major phenomenologist has his own distinct brand of phenomenology, so in order to answer our question, we have to determine Merleau-Ponty's relationship to his phenomenological predecessors. This is quite an expansive topic that could sustain a thesis on its own. We need not spend too much time on the matter since most of the connected issues don't influence our interpretation in any important way. There is however one question that needs to be resolved since our answer is going to dictate how we understand every element of Merleau-Ponty's system. The question I have in mind is whether we ought to understand

³ Spontaneous organization of the sensory field in which there are only organizations, more or less stable, more or less articulated.

⁴ I spell out what precisely I mean by the Cartesian framework or picture in chapter 15: The Cartesian Framework

Merleau-Ponty as a follower of Husserl or Heidegger. In *The Primacy of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty dedicates a whole essay to elucidating this very issue.⁵ He sees himself as follower of Husserl's late writings, especially those that concern the *Lebenswelt*, departing from Husserl but only in the direction in which was his late thought already pointed. Dreyfus does not think this account of Merleau-Ponty's pedigree is tenable and I'm going to follow his line of reasoning. According to Dreyfus⁶, Merleau-Ponty downplays his immense debt to Heidegger, presumably in an attempt to distance himself from Heidegger's name (which is understandable given Heidegger's status after world war II and Merleau-Ponty is certainly not the only one guilty of this). He avoids mentioning him as much as possible and the result is that he ends up ascribing to Husserl what should have been attributed to Heidegger. He also has the tendency to sometimes read back into Husserl his own views and overall trajectory of thought. The result is that in the picture he presents there is as a stronger continuity with Husserl and more dramatic divergence from Heidegger than can be supported. So, according to Dreyfus, how should we understand Merleau-Ponty's relation to his two predecessors?

5. Husserl or Heidegger

Merleau-Ponty is clearly fully on board with the core spirit of Husserl's project. He is not interested in any grand philosophical system building or metaphysical speculation, he wants to leave all theoretical constructions aside and return to the realm of raw, conceptually untainted phenomena, back to the things themselves. His project is to go back to this primordial realm of lived experience and provide a faithful description of its structures. Not to explain or analyze but simply to lay bare, to make explicit. But however enthusiastically does Merleau-Ponty embrace the spirit of Husserl's project, he is deeply dissatisfied with the way Husserl goes about in actuality fulfilling it. He rejects most of the central components of Husserl's system like the transcendental subject, the sharp distinction between immanence of consciousness and transcendence of the world as well as the separability of pure essences from facts (and consequently also the eidetic reduction), and so on.⁷ Husserl maintains that the phenomenologist must remain indifferent to contingent aspects of any concrete case, just as mathematician must remain indifferent to contingent properties of a geometrical drawing of the triangle and focus on its disembodied essence. The result is that his reductions take him to a depersonalized subject scrubbed clean of any particularities and left only in its common, general outlines. Merleau-Ponty, in Dreyfus' reading, follows Heidegger in rejecting this view of individual as an illegitimate, theory driven abstraction that amounts to heavy distortion of the phenomena. The goal is not to provide a detached description of the general structures of consciousness, but to describe structures of experience of a *Dasein* (although Merleau-Ponty does not adopt Heidegger's conceptual apparatus) in its facticity, oriented towards some vital situation, immersed in skillfully coping with his environment, emblematically put, in its being-

⁵ *The Primacy of Perception* is a collection of writings that appeared in various publications between 1947 and 1961 and the essay I'm referring to is titled *Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man*.

⁶ Dreyfus treats this issue in the first in his series of lectures on Merleau-Ponty.

⁷ These are the core elements of Husserl's mature philosophy which is characterized by transcendental idealism and which I date from the publication of his *Ideas I* onward. It is likely that Merleau-Ponty might be more aligned with Husserl's project prior to his transcendental turn, but I have no space to honor this distinction and the resulting picture would be the same.

in-the-world⁸. Thus, In Dreyfus' reading, when it comes to actually fulfilling the project, Merleau-Ponty turns away from Husserl and embraces Heidegger.

There are two important senses in which we ought to understand Merleau-Ponty as a continuation of Heidegger. Firstly, he picks up where Heidegger left off in *Being and Time* and fills the two blank places left after him: embodiment and perception. Secondly, he continues to pursue Heidegger's goal of liberating western philosophy from the tyranny of the Cartesian picture.⁹ The central conviction of Dreyfus' interpretation which I will be following in this thesis, is that Merleau-Ponty takes up the project of *Being and Time* and never really moves beyond its confines. He adopts Heidegger's views on the human-world relationship and uses this framework to lay out the structures of our primary contact with the world.

There is however one point on which Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger radically differ and that is the question of what is to be regarded as ontologically primary. While for Heidegger it is something like the being of beings and phenomenology serves to him as the means of getting at this more fundamental issue, for Merleau-Ponty it is the perceived life-world, the rock bottom layer of human experience, whose structures serve as our access to being and truth and in which are all higher cognitive functions nested. This primal layer of experience is what Merleau-Ponty is trying to describe and what is going to occupy us for the entire second part of this thesis. From now on, I'm going to refer to it as the phenomenal field.

6. Merleau-Ponty's Project and the Phenomenal Field

To sum up, the picture I'm trying to sell you is this: Merleau-Ponty strives to describe the deepest region of human psyche where the inner comes into unmediated contact with the outer and forms with it a unified field of experience. To put it in slightly different terms, he wants to describe human experience as it is when we are absorbed in skillfully coping with our environment. Since the traditional Cartesian picture turns out to be hopelessly insufficient for this task (as will become apparent once I start describing the phenomenal field in the second part of this thesis), he formulates his observations within Heideggerian framework, which is much better suited for this purpose. Within this new framework, he is able to restate the old insights of the Gestaltists and finally give the phenomena their adequate expression.

The goals of Merleau-Ponty's project, as I understand it, are (1) to provide faithful description of the phenomena (to lay out the structure of the phenomenal field), (2) to work himself out of the old cartesian dualism (and correlatively, mediational epistemology) and replace it with something more adequate, and (3) to unearth the origins of rationality in the more fundamental layer of our experience in which we are in direct contact with the world. Of course, (1) cannot be done without (2) and vice versa.

So far, I have been mentioning the phenomenal field only in vague allusions. We will spend the whole second part of this thesis describing its structures, but since it is the central concept of Merleau-Ponty's system and everything presupposes some understanding of what it refers to, it will be useful to give a rough exposition of it now on the outset.

Phenomenal field is the primary strata of our experience in which we collide with the

⁸ Or being-toward-the-world, to use Merleau-Ponty's own terminology.

⁹ It might be objected that attempts to move beyond Descartes are already in Husserl and although that is true, the way Merleau-Ponty goes about it is distinctly Heideggerian.

world and which serves as grounds for all higher cognitive capacities. It is a realm of experience that is pre-conceptual: it stands prior to our capacity for language and propositional thought. It is also pre-objective: it stands prior to the world of stable objects with properties in which we normally move and it serves as a transcendental condition for it. The objective world results from, stands on top of this primeval realm where everything is constantly shimmering and shifting, nothing is ever finished and ossified into a stable thing, everything is to a greater or lesser degree indeterminate. The objective world covers up its origins so it might seem to us that it has been there all along.¹⁰ The phenomenal field is even pre-personal: it stands prior to any distinction between subject and object, grasping and grasped, inner and outer, active and passive. These categories are in a sense derivative, they emerge into being only with the act of reflection. On this primal level, there is simply one unified field of experience, one perceptual milieu where terms like 'subject' and 'object' are merely two sides of the same coin, two points of view on the same underlying reality. Everything in here is endowed with a vital significance which speaks directly to the body and solicits from it specific behaviors. It is not a domain of the subject since that comes to being only with the act of reflection, but rather of a kind of pre-personal bodily subjectivity that is irreducible to the traditional categories of in-it-self and for-it-self (hence the inadequacy of the Cartesian picture) and thus presents a new, third kind of being.

All this is, of course, going to be explored further. This brief list of features of the phenomenal field is only supposed to give the reader only a rough preunderstanding on which we will be able to build. What needs to be understood at this point is that the phenomenal field is the deep structure that has to be in place if we are to live in a world of stable objects endowed with meaning. It is always there, working silently in the background, and if everything goes well, it is just as invisible to us as water is to a fish. This hiddenness of the phenomenal field however presents a problem for the phenomenologist. His job is to present a faithful description of its structures, but how can he describe something that is invisible? What methods can he employ that would enable him to make these structures explicit?

7. Merleau-Ponty's Method

It might seem that the right tool for the job of getting at these fundamental structures of experience would be some form of introspection. Just look inwards and record what you find. Seems intuitive enough. This approach however contains the tacit assumption that the act of reflection does not change the phenomena. According to Merleau-Ponty, this assumption is completely false. Mental processes undergo a qualitative change when they are placed under the penetrating light of consciousness. Reflection only tells me what these processes are like when I'm reflecting on them, I'm not discovering what was there all along, only what I put there by the act of reflection, and the domain where this method is useful is therefore very narrow.

So, introspection does not turn out to be the royal road to the structures of experience we hoped it to be. What then are the methods that Merleau-Ponty makes use of? I think that that we can discern three which I will now present in descending order of importance.

¹⁰ This is how the Gestaltists and others came to hold the prejudice of the world, they fall prey to this general tendency of perception to forget itself in favor of the perceived that it discloses.

The first and by far the most important method is to observe and study pathological cases where these structures are in some way disturbed, impaired, or completely missing, and then to infer from that what they have to be like in normal healthy people. Two notable examples of this method, both from *Phenomenology of Perception*, are the phantom limb phenomena and the famous Schneider case, a brain damaged patient of Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein.¹¹

Merleau-Ponty makes use of the second method when he needs to slow down some process which usually takes place on too short a time scale for us to be able to discern its constitutive moments or even to notice that it takes place at all. He comes up with familiar real-life situations where these processes occur slowed down to manageable durations, and where we can watch them unfold as if in bullet time. Merleau-Ponty has a real genius for this.¹²

Merleau-Ponty uses the third method very sporadically and I mention it mostly for the sake of completeness. He thinks that artists, and especially painters, have through their craft developed a capacity for attitudes which are inaccessible to normal people and which can be of great use to a phenomenologist. They have learned to see or unsee certain things, like for example to isolate a patch of color and see what it looks like independently of the horizon on which it is presented (to disregard color constancy). Merleau-Ponty's favorite case study in this regard is Cezanne, who in his paintings captures things as they shimmer into being, as they are split second before they stabilize as finished, fully determined objects.¹³

If I did my job, the reader has now some basic understanding of Merleau-Ponty's place in the global network of ideas, of the character of his project, of his aims, and of the methods he employs to reach them. My somewhat simplified but hopefully not entirely inaccurate account will do for the purposes of this thesis, so let's leave the preliminary issues behind and move to part II, where we delve into the structures of the phenomenal field.

¹¹ This method is another element that Merleau-Ponty gets from Heidegger, who in a similar fashion uses breakdown cases to get at the underlying structure of experience. Like, for example, when a hammer ceases to function as a hammer and you become aware of the background involved in using equipment.

¹² For an example, I would refer the reader to the ship story from second chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which is too long to present it here in full. "If I walk along the shore towards a ship which has run aground [...]" (PP 17)

¹³ Merleau-Ponty dedicates to Cezanne the first essay in his book *Sense and Nonsense* (titled 'Cezanne's Doubt') which I highly recommend to the reader since the unusual context in which is the discussion framed can help certain things to finally click.

Part II: Structures of the Phenomenal Field

8. Holistic Account of Perception

Phenomenology of Perception starts off with rejection of traditional theories of perception. There is no need to discuss these theories separately since they all fail for the same reason: they understand perception in atomistic terms. All the misconceptions that plague the traditional theories are epitomized in one misguided concept: sensation. The concept of sensation may seem perfectly natural and obvious. It is supposed to refer to “*the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dotlike impact*” (PP 3), an “*isolated datum of perception*” (PP 4). It is imagined to be a kind of perceptual atom which is through some process combined with other atoms into a meaningful object which then appears in the space of consciousness. The problem is that “*this notion corresponds to nothing in our experience*” (PP 3) and “*once introduced [it] distorts any analysis of perception*” (PP 13). The concept of sensation is the result of what the psychologists call ‘the experience error’, that is, of the tendency to take the properties of objects and read them back into our perceptions of them. Consequently, since the basic premise of these theories is wrong, they inevitably fall prey to insoluble problems. They fail to show satisfactorily how the discrete packets of meaningless data are supposed to be synthesized into meaningful world of objects, they are unable to explain certain visual experiences like various types of optical illusions, the Müller-Lyer illusion, for example, etc. Within the confines of atomistic theories, what possible reason could there be for the two lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion to appear unequal? These kinds of problems mount up until it becomes obvious that a dramatic reevaluation of the basic premises is needed. The time becomes ripe for a paradigm shift.

This shift was made by the Gestaltists and it consists in a kind of inversion: it is not the case that what is primarily given are parts out of which the whole is then constructed. On the contrary, what is first received is the whole, the Gestalt, which then determines not only the meaning of the parts, but also what can even count as a part. That is to say, perception needs to be understood in holistic terms. The most basic perceptual experience is not that of a “dotlike impact” but of a figure on a background, of a thing which stands against a horizon from which it receives its meaning. When we understand perception in holistic terms, the Müller-Lyer illusion does not pose a problem, on the contrary, it is precisely what we would expect to happen. The two lines look different because they are situated in different contexts, they stand against different horizons. The problem of the origin of meaning also evaporates since the whole, the world, is on this account already meaningful at the rock bottom level of description. If there is a synthesis being performed, it is not on the level of mental events, which are at bottom already holistic and meaningful, but on a level of neural processes. Any further questions about how the Gestalt comes about fall into the field of neurology.

Let me give you an example to make the holistic picture of perception more concrete. Imagine you are walking down and your eyes fall on a house. The moment the house invades your attention, it gets unpacked from the background and becomes a figure, an object of your attention. The house does not appear in a vacuum, lines of intentionality radiate from it in all directions. They point toward your bodily nature, it is an object of certain kind that is to be coped with in a certain way, they point to the broader network of social practices, to your past experiences with houses, to the objects that are located around it, despite the fact that only the

front of the house is in your direct line of sight, the inside and the back are somehow already present in your visual experience, and so on.¹⁴ All these things are in an indeterminate way already present in your perception of the house and influence how it appears to you. The house stands in this nexus of more or less discernable references which taken together create a kind of atmosphere or a meaningful halo around the object against which it appears and thanks to which it has the meaning it has.¹⁵ That's what meaning is, the ability of something to point beyond itself.¹⁶ Taken apart from this context, the object would have no meaning at all, it would not look like a house but at best as an amorphous blob. The moment you turn your attention to something else and make into a figure, the house submerges back into the background, fusing with it and becoming part of the atmosphere from whence it then influences how other things appear to you. Now Image that as you approach the house, you suddenly realize that it's not a house at all but a movie set, a façade without a back. With this realization, all your expectations explode, the background gets violently restructured and after a moment, the thing does not look like a house anymore but just as a movie set. Since the background changed and the figure derives its appearance from the background, the thing literally looks different now than it did before.

I already mentioned indeterminacy several times and indeed it is a key feature of perception that is mentioned again and again in *Phenomenology of Perception*. “*We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon*” (PP 6), everything present in the phenomenal field is to a greater or lesser degree indeterminate: the background in the sense that it is experienced normatively rather than descriptively, the features of an object that are obstructed by its front side are in some indeterminate way already contained in my perception of it, whatever is behind my back is also not without some element of visual presence¹⁷, the lines of Müller-Lyer illusion are both equal and unequal, the features of an object that I can't see from my current position are also in some vague way present in my perception of it, and so on. Indeterminacy must be recognized as having a positive presence in experience.

9. Body, Motor-intentionality, and the Body Schema

The time is now right for us to introduce the body into the picture. The body plays an absolutely central role in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. We are not yet in a position to appreciate just how central it is, but we are in a position to make some observations.

The first thing that needs to be noted is that humans are not some neutral, perfectly indifferent observers standing over and above the universe, passively receiving objectively valid truths about how things in themselves are. Humans are, before anything else, essentially embodied creatures absorbed in coping with the vital situations in which they find themselves.¹⁸

¹⁴ To borrow Gilbert Ryle's expression, I don't see a front of a house but a house from the front.

¹⁵ Avoid the impression that the Gestalt could somehow be broken up into constitutive moments, that would take you back to atomism.

¹⁶ Better translation would be 'sense' but I will stick with the conventional 'meaning'.

¹⁷ “*We see as far as our hold on thing extends, far beyond the zone of clear vision, and even behind us. When we reach the limits of the visual field, we do not pass from vision to non-vision: the gramophone playing in the next room, and not expressly seen by me, still counts in my visual field.*” (PP 277)

¹⁸ You might be tempted to retort that this is perfectly obvious, but the failure to realize this simple basic fact gave no small amounts of trouble to researchers of AI.

This being the case, things that appear in our fields of experience are not some copies of objective states of affairs. What and how manifests itself to us is determined by our practical interests which are expressions of this basic fact of our essentially bodily nature. These interests are, in the most general terms, to survive and to do so as competently as possible. Our field of perception breaks itself up and organizes itself in such a manner that is most conducive towards accomplishing this goal.

The second, less intuitive thing to note is that things do not have meaning in themselves, the meaning of a thing is not somehow woven into the metaphysical structure of cosmos. The fact that I find myself among objects which are differentiated from their surrounding and endowed with meaning owes to the fact that at a more fundamental strata of our experience things speak directly to the body. They beckon to it, driving it to assume certain posture, to perform some specific behavior, to organize itself in such a way that will enable it to cope most effectively with them. All higher order meaning, conceptually articulated or not, is derivative of this primordial significance things have for the body, it is grounded in this domain of our immediate contact with the world. My body is thus my opening onto the meaningful world.¹⁹

The third thing that warrants attention is that bodily movements are directed towards things, they are about things. My bodily movements and actions are expressions of my practical relationship towards the world, they carry out meaningful projects and are responsive to relevant features of objects. But this is only a roundabout way of saying that bodily movements are endowed with intentionality. Merleau-Ponty uses for this low kind of bodily intentionality the expression ‘motor-intentionality’ (*intentionnalité motrice*).

It ought to be clear by now that the picture Merleau-Ponty is presenting is not one where humans simply act upon an inert environment. Between the body and the world, there is a reciprocal, even dialectical relationship. The body casts its aims onto the world and by doing so determines what shows itself to it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[ones] projects polarize the world” (*PP 112*). At the same time, the world speaks to the body, makes it organize itself in response to its environment, and determines what can its projects be in the first place. Both sides of this relationship are active and passive in equal measure. Viewed in this way, the body and the world form a synergistic system, they are just two points of view at the same underlying reality, they are two sides of a single world-body Gestalt. The body and the world are correlates, understandable only through one another: I perceive my body only because I’m perceptually oriented in the world and the world is available to me only through the medium of the body.

An important consequence of this is that body is not simply an object situated in geometric space. Things don’t present themselves to it as ‘about ten centimeters in front of my right hand and bit to the left’, but as a to-be-grasped-and-shifted-closer or whatever the project is. Things are not just there, inert, sitting in the cartesian systems of coordinates. They show up in a space that is at bottom practical and they exist as one half of the world-body system, as correlates of the body. The body then is not neutrally situated in the space, it inhabits it (*habite*).²⁰ “[B]ody is in the world as the heart is in the organism, it keeps the visible spectacle

¹⁹ This, in a nutshell, is Merleau-Ponty’s doctrine of primacy of perception and I will have more to say about it in chapter 14.

²⁰ This distinction of geometrical and practical space is based on the already mentioned Schneider case where the patient was able to perform motor-intentional behaviors that take place in the practical space but could not perform more abstract actions that require orientation in the geometrical space. He could grasp something but he could not point at it. The distinction is also one of the features of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that has been taken up by the scientific mainstream and became a recognized fact (thanks to the work of neuroscientists David Milner and Melvyn Goodale).

constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system." (PP 203)

The thing that ensures, or perhaps is, this isomorphism of the body and the world is what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'body schema' (*le schéma corporel*).²¹ The body schema is not something that could ever be directly experienced, but it's always there, working silently in the background, implicitly present in everything we do. It is that which binds the world and the body together, a pre-conscious system of bodily movements and their spatial equivalents, it coordinates bodily motions and vests them with purpose aimed towards something in the world. It is that which opens up the world for me and that thanks to which I always have a sense of where the different parts of my body are and what is their relative position. It is by no means easy to get a clear picture of what precisely is the body schema supposed to be and I will have more to say about it.

10. Bodily Nature of Perception

"Thus the thing is correlative to my body and, in more general terms, to my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. It is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it; it is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body." (PP 320)

So far, we have learned that for Merleau-Ponty perception is an essentially bodily process at the bottom of which there is some kind of correspondence between the adopted bodily attitude and the structure of the perceived thing. This certainly is a very strange idea that demands further elucidation. What precisely does it mean for a thing to be "correlative to my body"? As we are about to see, this is not just some flowery, metaphorical language, Merleau-Ponty means what he is saying quite literally and in a very strong sense.

As Merleau-Ponty writes: "[e]xternal perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act" (PP 205), and "[e]very external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my own body" (PP 206). The structure of a perceptual act, as I understand it, is this. In the first milliseconds after the sensible invades my perceptual field it has a form of "vague beckoning [...] [a] question which is obscurely expressed" (PP 214). At this point, the thing is merely an amorphous blob that is nevertheless already vested with significance, it beckons to the body, invites it to adopt a specific stance towards it. The thing poses for the body a puzzle which needs to be solved. This in practice means that the body needs to adopt the right attitude, to undergo a "patterning of a certain tension felt throughout the body" (PP 211), to assume specific matrix of muscular contractions. This act of patterning of muscular tensions is what articulates the sensible, what brings it about, what makes it determinate so when this process is done, there stands before me no longer an amorphous blob but a finished, stable object. Perception thus is a process by which an object literally impresses itself onto the body. "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven [...]" (PP 235). This is why Merleau-Ponty

²¹ The conventional translation is 'body image' but that is just flat out wrong since it evokes the idea of some sort of representation which it is definitely not. Moreover, the term 'body image' has also been used by others to refer to something that is precisely what Merleau-Ponty doesn't mean and wants to distance himself from, so it's a horrible translation all around and I will be sticking with 'body schema'. We have Colin Smith's translation to thank for this translational blunder.

sometimes speaks of perception as a form of communion between the thing and the body. Vision does not only concern eye, the optical nerve and the corresponding area in the brain, I see with my whole body, it is a process by which the whole body comes to terms with what is perceived.²² Thus, it is not really me who perceives but rather the body itself, or, if you will, a certain form of pre-personal bodily subjectivity. “[I]f I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that one perceives in me, and not that I perceive.” (215)

This is a very peculiar view of perception and takes some getting used to. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how it works in practice with a minimalistic example of seeing a patch of color. “[T]he colour, before being seen, gives itself away through the experience of a certain bodily attitude appropriate only to that colour and precisely indicative of it, ‘there is in my body a sensation of slipping downwards, so that it cannot be green, and can be only blue’ [...] says one subject. Another says: ‘I clenched my teeth, and so I know that it is yellow’ [...] there is first of all the experience of a certain bodily disposition and suddenly the sensation runs into and ‘spreads through the visual domain’.” (PP 211)²³

Even if it is accepted that this description works for these kinds of minimalistic situations, it might be doubted whether this model can really be extrapolated to perception of complex objects or the world as a whole. I think that it can be. If I’m understanding Merleau-Ponty correctly, the general idea is that to perceive anything is always to be in a way already bodily coping with it. Passages like this one seem to support this reading: “I see the [...] stone in the sense that my whole perceptual and motor field endows the bright spot with the significance ‘stone on the path’. And already I prepare to feel under my foot this smooth, firm surface.” (PP 297) To perceive the stone means for it to map itself onto my foot and, in a less determinate way, the rest of my body. This mapping takes place even in situations where I don’t intend to actually step on the stone. There is a vague bodily readiness to perform the complex of actions that is usually associated with the perceived object. With the adoption of the posture that corresponds to the object, I am enveloped in the aura of meaning that radiates from it. Color gives the life an atmosphere, a certain base rhythm (beige has a calming effect, makes people docile, and is for this reason used in prisons, mental hospitals, and state schools). But this aspect of perception is not exclusive to colors, it pertains to everything capable of becoming an object of perception. This is why Merleau-Ponty can talk about the sensible as a “*certain way of being in the world*” (PP 212).

This description does not apply only to visual experiences or even the entire realm of natural objects, it holds for cultural objects also: “If a word is shown to a subject for too short a time for him to be able to read it, the word ‘warm’, for example, induces a kind of experience of warmth which surrounds him with something in the nature of a meaningful halo. The word ‘hard’ produces a sort of stiffening of the back and neck, and only in a secondary way does it project itself into the visual or auditory field and assume the appearance of a sign or a word. Before becoming the symbol of a concept it is first of all an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference.” (PP 235)

²² It seems that cases of full body paralysis might present some problems for this view of perception. I think that this objection is satisfactorily answered by saying that what matters are not the processes in the body as such, which are absent in the paralytic, but the processes in the brain which accompany them, correspond to them, form a pair with them.

²³ The subjects from the example are people to whom has been quickly flashed a color on a screen, the duration being too short for them to consciously register the color but long enough for the body to adopt the appropriate stance.

As I said, this is a very strange idea. It might help the reader, as it helped me, to think of Merleau-Ponty's views on perception as an extrapolation of the James-Lange theory of emotion to the entire realm of qualitative states. The statement that the bodily expression precedes the mental one holds not just for emotions (it's not that I cry because I'm sad, on the contrary, I'm sad because I cry), but more generally for any qualitative experience, that is, even those of "meaningful halos" of colors, objects or words.

We are not done with the bodily nature of perception just yet. There is one natural consequence of what I have been talking about that warrants at least a brief discussion. Since it is the whole body which is coming to terms with the object, perception is never purely visual or tactile or audible experience. The senses are not really separate entities as science traditionally understands them, they are rather entry points which open unto a shared space which is the object. "[T]he brittleness, hardness, transparency and crystal ring of a glass all translate a single manner of being" (PP 319). "The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing" (PP 229). You can literally see the hardness of the stone, softness of a pillow, heaviness of an anvil, roughness of a sand paper, you can hear the brittleness of two glasses clinging together or the weight of a brick hitting the ground. Cezanne even claimed that he could smell the painted landscape. Synesthesia is not some exotic pathology, it is the norm. "It is impossible completely to describe the colour of the carpet without saying that it is a carpet, made of wool, and without implying in this colour a certain tactile value, a certain weight and a certain resistance to sound. The thing is an entity of a kind such that the complete definition of one of its attributes demands that of the subject in its entirety." (PP 323)

11. Maximum Grip, the Intentional Arc, and More Body Schema

In Dreyfuss's reading of Merleau-Ponty which I'm following in this paper, at the bottom of everything we do, at the basis of our being-in-the-world, there is an unceasing striving towards some optimal state, a perpetual effort to cope in a more optimal way. This optimal state, or the maximum (or optimal) grip as Dreyfuss usually calls it, figures in our experience as a normative background element that guides our every action. In Dreyfus's interpretation, this maximum grip story is the rock bottom level of description of our relationship with our environment and everything else can be seen as its expression.²⁴ It is never directly experienced, there is no positive feeling accompanying it, only a vague feeling of tension or uneasiness whenever we deviate from it. To put it in somewhat different language, at the bottom of our experience is a sensitivity to the direction and slope of an improvement curve. Or, maybe even better, you (your

²⁴ It might be doubted whether Dreyfuss's approach to see the maximum grip story at the bottom of Merleau-Ponty's whole conception of the man-environment relationship is really tenable since Merleau-Ponty mentions the maximum grip (or an equilibrium, body being geared onto the world, or some equivalent expression) only in few places in the book and it might therefore seem dubious to ascribe to it this paramount importance. Fair point, I would however argue that this conspicuous absence is on the contrary evidence for the crucial role of the concept and would point the reader to Merleau-Ponty's own theory that for every philosopher the most important ideas are rarely explicitly discussed since they are always in the background, so to say permeating and coloring everything.

It might also be doubted whether it is really appropriate to continue to regard Merleau-Ponty as a Heideggerian since this concept that plays an absolutely central role in our interpretation, the maximum grip, is lifted directly from Husserl's *Ideas II*. I would argue that it is, since the overall framework is that of Heideggerian everyday being-in-the-world, of a Dasein thrown into the world coping with a vital situation, as opposed to the depersonalized abstract transcendental subjectivity of Husserl. This core, distinctly Husserlian element is situated within a fundamentally Heideggerian framework.

body) are situated in an attractor field that pulls you towards the lowest energy state. In the last analysis, humans are just like a “*drop of oil which uses all its strength to solve in practical terms the maximum and minimum problem which confronts it*” (PP 78). Just like a drop of oil always moves to assume a spherical shape, our bodies constantly move towards the state of equilibrium which is the maximum grip (on a thing or on the world in general). In practice, this means shifting of posture to change the weight distribution when you’re skiing, slightly adjusting your grip on a tennis racket, bringing an object closer to the light to get a better look, tilting your head to hear better what your friend is saying, and so on. The general idea is that of tweaking some conditions in order to cope more successfully with the situation in which you find yourself. Imagine for instance the following scenario: you are walking down an aisle in an art gallery and some painting catches your eye. You move closer to take in more of its detail, but not so close that you would lose your grip on the painting as a whole. You stop directly in front of it since this is the only angle that doesn’t create distortions. You might even squint your eyes a bit to adjust the amount of light that is hitting your retina. The painting demands to be seen in a certain way, it keeps moving your body around until the vague sense that the conditions could be better disappears. At this point, you have made the painting as determinate as it’s going to get. It reveals all of its relevant features, discloses itself in its maximum richness, in a word, you have the optimal grip on it. In Merleau-Ponty’s words: “*For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself, at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope.*” (PP 302). More generally: “*My body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world.*” (PP 250)

But let’s think about what this description presupposes. The fact, that you can feel that the grip is not as good as it could be, and the natural way in which you move to the place where it is better means that there must be something in you that has already seen the object from the optimum prior to you in actuality seeing it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “*When I am led through a strange apartment towards its owner, there is someone who knows on my behalf, for whom the unfolding of the visual spectacle has a meaning, and who moves towards a goal, and I entrust or lend myself to this knowledge which I do not possess. When some detail in a landscape, which I have been unable to distinguish alone, is pointed out to me, there is someone who has already seen it, who already knows where to stand and where to look in order to see it.*” (PP 310) “*But what is this perceptual genius at work in our visual field, tending towards the most determinate form?*” (PP 262-3) This perceptual genius that takes me by the hand and leads me towards the maximum grip is the same perceptual genius that knows how to answer to the “vague beckoning” of a sensible in order to make it into an object: the body schema.

So far, I have been talking about the body schema as if it was something static, but that is of course not the case. You can alter it, develop it and make it richer by learning new skills and acquiring new habits. That’s what acquiring a skill at bottom is, developing the system of equivalents between the bodily movements and their worldly referents.²⁵ As you get older and gain more experience, the complexity of the system of interrelations and correspondences

²⁵ I have in mind skills like roller skating, doing a backflip, or performing a handstand, rather than reciting Iliad from memory, calculating a square roots in the head, or imagining four dimensional objects. Although, even the latter category is probably in some subtler, harder to pinpoint way accompanied by change in the body schema.

between the body and the world grows. That means, you unlock new behaviors, better, more efficient ways of handling objects, more economic ways of performing tasks and reaching the desired states. You progressively get more in tune with world's richness. And, since things are correlates of the body, you can't alter your ability to adopt bodily attitudes without altering how things show up to you. Your experience feeds back to the world and effects how things look. Stove literally looks different to a child after it gets burned. When you move to a new city, the at first nondescript streets progressively start to look as 'the way to the grocery shop', 'the way to the school', and so on. Correlatively, as new behaviors are becoming available to you, the at bottom already meaningful world only keeps getting more meaningful. This mechanism by which experience feeds back into perception is what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'intentional arc' and, according to Dreyfus, it is the second most important concept of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology after the maximum grip. And it is the unceasing quest for the optimal hold on the environment which determines what is going to be woven into the world (and the body) by means of the intentional arc.

Thus, by the way of the intentional arc, the body schema keeps getting richer with experience (or perhaps better, the enriching of the body schema is what experience is). But if we reflect, it becomes clear that the body schema cannot be all acquired, it must have an innate element. If the body schema was entirely obtained from experience, we, our bodies, would not have the knowledge of how something looks from the optimal prior to us actually seeing it from the optimal, and thus could not experience stable objects before we actually saw them from the optimal. There is "*a past which has never been present*" (PP 242), a hardwired prehistory of understanding of natural objects (and correlatively of our bodies), their properties, and what they would look like from the optimal. At birth, we already have a basic bodily understanding of the world. There is an innate element to the body schema which serves as the basis which the intentional arc can further develop, make it more complex and nuanced.

12. Real Properties of Objects and Atmospheric Elements of Perception

The world, as natural sciences understand it, is a domain of idealized entities which stand to one another in relations which can be without remainder expressed in the language of mathematical equations. In this view, properties of objects are just numbers, perfectly objective quantities. The problem with this conception is that it has been decoupled from the everyday life-world, it has nothing to do with the actual phenomena. My original experience of distance does not have the form of '100 meters along the x axis and 20 meters along the y axis', I do not experience weight as '128 grams'. There is an existential dimension of properties of objects and the conditions in which they are presented that has been covered up and forgotten in the process of mathematization of nature.²⁶ It is the job of the phenomenologist to restore this existential dimension and describe these various attributes as they are originally given in the lived experience. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty does, and he does it by linking the properties of objects to the maximum grip story which, as we have said, is the rock bottom description of our being-in-the-world.

²⁶ By 'existential dimension' I mean the aspects of the objects that can only appear to an engaged, embodied consciousness.

Based on what we said in the last chapter, it might be expected that for Merleau-Ponty the real properties would be the properties of an object as experienced when the observer has the optimal grip on it. Indeed, the reader might sometimes get an impression that that this is what is meant, but there is a second, much more important and interesting sense of the term ‘real property of an object’. This second sense will be our primary concern in this chapter.

In this second sense of the term, a real property of an object is not something that could ever be directly experienced. It is rather a normative element in the background that leads every particular act of perception. “*The real colour persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory presence.*” (PP 305) It is thanks to these real properties that objects maintain their qualities across contexts in which they are presented. When I look on the white wall of my room and turn off the lights, the wall does not become grey, it is still a white wall, only now it is a white wall in shade. Objects maintain their properties, what changes are the conditions in which they are presented. These real properties do have a kind of positive presence, only they are experienced normatively. I experience worsening of the conditions of presentation in terms of losing my grip on the object. I feel increase of tension or uneasiness which drives me to improve these conditions again. There is connected with this sense of the object becoming less real, of it losing its degree of reality. When I’m asked to gauge a color of a wall, my eyes are automatically led to the spot which is most representative of its true color. It is as if the wall was in this place shiniest and sharpest here and it gets progressively dimmer and fuzzier the further away from this ideal spot you get. “*Given a white wall in the shade and a grey piece of paper in the light, it cannot be said that the wall remains white and the paper grey; the paper makes a greater impact on the eye, it is lighter and clearer whereas the wall is darker and duller.*” (PP 305) That is to say, even though the wavelength and amount of light reflected is the same, the paper is experienced as more real since it is presented in the optimal conditions which allow the perceiver to get better grip on it while the wall is presented in bad conditions that only allow it to disclose small amount of its relevant features and is consequently experienced as possessing a lesser degree of reality. Descriptions of other properties like shape or size would proceed analogically. To sum this point up, real color of an object is that which enables me to experience the perceived color of an object as that which would be better presented if I moved closer to the light source. Similarly, real shape of an object is that which enables me to experience the perceived shape as that which would be better presented if I rotated the object a bit along this axis, and real size of an object is that which enables me to experience the perceived size of an object as that which would be better experienced if I got three steps closer to the object. In each case, the real X functions as a normative background element which moves the body to improve the conditions of presentation of the object in order to make it more determinate so I can consequently cope with it in more optimal way.

Something similar is true for what we might call the atmospheric elements of perception, like lighting or distance. These are also experienced normatively and lead the gaze or the body to the place from where it can get the best possible grip on the object. My original experience of distance is that of something that needs to be increased or decreased in order for me to get a better grip on the object. My experience of watching car speed away from me on a highway is that of me losing my grip on it. This is again accompanied with a sense of the car becoming

less and less real. Person standing kilometer away is experienced as less real than person who stands right next to you.²⁷

13. Summary

Since we just covered in few pages most of what I take to be the major points of *Phenomenology of Perception*, a quick recap is probably in order. Merleau-Ponty presents us with a view of humans and the world in which neither can be understood apart from the other. At the rock bottom layer of description, they form together a synergistic system, a single world-body Gestalt, where it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. Any talk about the world or the body points towards this more primary reality which encompasses them both and of which they are merely aspects. Merleau-Ponty's aim is to describe this primeval domain in which the body and the world intermingle and intertwine, and which we dubbed the phenomenal field.

The most basic feature of the structure of the phenomenal field is its unceasing striving to organize itself in such a way that would enable the organism not only to survive, but to do so as efficiently, as economically as possible. Every other facet of the phenomenal field can be seen as an expression of this perpetual drive towards an optimal grip on the world.

Perception is a process in which the world and the body part of the Gestalt are in equal part passive and active. It is a process by which the whole body comes to terms with the object, or, from the other side, a process by which the object imprints itself onto the body. That is to say, on this basic level of description, objects show themselves as correlates of the body.

The thing which binds the body and the world together is the body schema. We can understand the body schema as an isomorphism between bodily movements and their spatial equivalents. It is that which endows the bodily movements with the quality of being about things, of being purposively directed towards something in the environment.

This is the crux of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as I understand it. It ought to be obvious by now that the picture which Merleau-Ponty offers is not just another variation on the old Cartesian theme. It is not just a novel way of draping the same basic worldview, but a genuinely new and fascinating way of understanding our relation to the world. In the third and final part of this thesis, we are going to shift our attention to Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Cartesianism and to the alternative framework which he intends as its replacement.

²⁷ Dreyfus discusses this dependence of the degree of reality on conditions of presentation in the 19th lecture in his serious on Merleau-Ponty.

Part III: Rejection of the Cartesian Framework

14. Primacy of Perception

With the benefit of the descriptive analysis we underwent in part II of this thesis, we are now in a position to understand Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of primacy of perception, sometimes referred to as phenomenological positivism, which is his solution to the contemporary quest for the grounds of reason. In the reading which I advocate in this thesis, the doctrine of primacy of perception has an absolutely central position in Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy, so much so that we might even understand the following quote as the programmatic statement for his early works.²⁸

*"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 all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action."*²⁹

This admittedly somewhat cryptic passage first of all puts forward the view that our conceptual thinking is embedded in our everyday coping, that it has the content it has only because it is situated within and underlied by a background of understanding which is generated by our bodily engagement with the environment. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty here by extension reaffirms the status of the perceived life-world, of the phenomenal field as the primary reality, since it serves as a transcendental condition for the world of objects and all higher cognitive activities like language, propositional thought, and reason itself. We ought to emphasize that the doctrine of primacy of perception does not reduce rationality to perception, it merely unearths its ultimate roots in this more fundamental dimension of our existence. The world of reason is derivative of this deeper, more primary realm of experience. It may not be immediately clear what precisely is Merleau-Ponty claiming so I will reiterate the point in slightly different terms. Our grasp on things is primordially one of bodily engagement with them. Every concept I have is, if you pardon the expression, parasitic on this more fundamental significance which the things have directly to the body. The very world of meaningful objects in which I move, is nested in, emerges out of, this more basic, evolutionarily more ancient domain where body and world interweave. It is our nature as embodied beings coping with the world which "*projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation*" (PP 136).

15. The Cartesian Framework

Before we get to Merleau-Ponty's own framework, let's quickly overview the one he is rejecting. According to the old picture, which in the history of philosophy appears in many different permutations and which is usually connected with Descartes' name, there are two kinds of things. On the one side, there are the subjects, things-for-themselves, entities endowed with

²⁸ I'm referring here primarily to the two major works of Merleau-Ponty's early career: *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M. and Edie, J. (1968). *The Primacy of Perception*. Northwestern University Press. pp.25.

rationality, capable of understanding themselves and their place in the order of things and which are moved by reasons. On the other side, there are the objects, things-for-themselves, which are uncomprehending, tossed around by the causal laws of nature. Subject has privileged access to the contents of its own mind, which, at least in principle, are immediately and entirely available to it in reflection. Any access the subject has to the world of objects is mediated through the senses. The object cannot make itself present to the subject as it is in itself, the subject can have only an image that stands for the object, a representation of the object. With the dualistic ontology there therefore comes connected an epistemological position which is characterized by this mediation. We might refer to it as mediational epistemology or representationalism. Between the subject and the object, there lays an unbridgeable chasm. Because we don't have access to things themselves, these positions have hard time avoiding skeptical, solipsistic, and relativistic conclusions.

This is the general picture. The particularities vary from time and place and not everything I write in my short summary may be completely accurate for every iteration of the Cartesian theme. I do however think that it is fair to say that the dualistic ontology and mediational epistemology are the two attributes which define the general mindset of which are the particular philosophies instances. Merleau-Ponty does not reject this or that philosophy but the general mindset itself. Due to its status as a framework, this mindset, the Cartesian picture, is not something you could simply take or leave. It is not really a set of propositions, but rather that within propositions are articulated. For most people, it is something so self-evident that it never even reaches conscious articulation, they never find themselves outside of it so it never becomes visible to them. It is the very medium of thought and as such it is completely invisible. To quote Charles Taylor: “[...] *qua framework, it felt obvious, unchallengeable, the necessary irreplaceable context for all thinking about these matters, hence not something one would ever need to examine. In this way, it worked insidiously and powerfully.*”³⁰ Most people don't realize they are in it, much less that there could be serious problems with it. And even those who do and who try to formulate an alternative to it are usually unable to escape its gravitational pull and just end up with a new variation on the same basic theme, often without even realizing that they have done so. To replace the Cartesian framework is therefore no small task. You cannot simply reject it, you have to work yourself out of it, make it explicit, all the while resisting the pull of the language which is itself through and through saturated by it. It is one of Merleau-Ponty's best claim to the status of first-rate philosopher that he might be the only person who has actually done it.³¹

Now we are finally in a position to put everything together and lay out Merleau-Ponty's own view of human beings and their relation to the world.

16. Body as a Third Kind of Being

Merleau-Ponty does not entirely reject the Cartesian categories of subject and object or the concept of representation. They do have a place in his system, only not as the primary reality

³⁰ Carman, T. and Hansen, M. (2005). *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.28.

³¹ Although, as I said, Heidegger did no small amount of necessary preliminary work towards accomplishing this goal.

but as something derivative. They are not present at the deepest layer of description. What is there at the deepest level of description is the world-body Gestalt, the being-towards-the-world, the lived body, the phenomenal field, the perceived life-world, the body schema. All these concepts are getting at something irreducible to the traditional categories of object and subject, something utterly unknown to the Cartesian tradition. I'm going to emblematically sum all these expressions under the concept of 'the body'. The body thus presents a new, third kind of being. This third kind of being stands in a sense between the other two since it makes to the world of objects available to the subject. In a more important sense, however, it stands prior to the other two categories since it serves as their transcendental condition. They emerge into being only when attention coils into itself and splits existence into inner and outer, the self and the not-self. Prior to that, there is only the body as the single milieu of interrelationships and equivalents with the double aspect of the world and our corporeal nature. It is because this milieu stands prior to any distinction between inner and outer that Merleau-Ponty can say that "[t]he world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (PP 407).

Hand in hand with the rejection of the subject-object ontology goes the necessity for a transformation of our understanding of understanding. Just as in the case of the categories of subject and object, Merleau-Ponty does not completely reject the concept of representation. It still has a place in the higher strata of our cognitive abilities, but at the deepest level of experience, the admittance of the body as a new kind of being has the result that "*a complete reform of understanding is called for*" (PP 49). At the level of the phenomenal field, understanding is a bodily affair and we colloquially call it skill. A skill cannot be understood as something that is contained purely within the body. Since at the bottom level of description the inner from the outer cannot be separated, understanding cannot exist apart from the world. Rather, it must be located in the whole world-body situation. "*The locus here is the ability to move-in-this-environment. [Understanding] exists not just in my body, but in my body-walking-the-streets. Similarly, my ability to be charming or seductive exists not in my body and voice, but in body-voice-in-conversation-with-interlocutor.*"³² There is no mediation going on, understanding of this sort is entirely non-representational and truly immediate. But, as I said, Merleau-Ponty does not do away with the concept of representation altogether. When I'm learning new skill, I need to represent to myself at all times what I'm doing. As I get better, the activity gets sedimented into the body schema, it gets woven into it. When I finally master the skill, all representation becomes superfluous.

17. Motivation as a Third Kind of Effect

If objects are moved by causes and subjects are moved by reasons, there is a new kind of effect that corresponds to the third ontological category which is the body. Merleau-Ponty, in continuity with the phenomenological tradition, calls this new kind of effect a 'motive'. In the realm of the phenomenal field, actions are not causally determined by mechanistic processes. Neither are they results of rational deliberation. Rather, they are responses to significance possessed by the environment, answers to solicitations from the world, which is, as we have

³² Carman, T. and Hansen, M. (2005). *The Cambridge companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.34.

seen, already meaningful at the rock bottom level of description. To be motivated is to be moved by the meaningful world. Motivation has the general structure of ‘for the sake of which’, consequent occurs for the sake of the antecedent and between the terms, there is sensitivity to the significance to the other.³³ A motive is then “*an antecedent which acts only through its significance*” (PP 259), and what we colloquially call a motive is only a special case of a much broader category.

We can easily convince ourselves that motivation is irreducible to either of the two types of effect that were already known by the Cartesians. I can understand perfectly well and have every reason to believe that the two lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion are equal. Nevertheless, the way the Gestalt is structured, the manner in which its parts interact, still motivates me to see one as being longer than the other. Unlike reasons, motives are non-thetic, they need not be propositionally articulated and sometimes they are not even able of becoming an object for reflection. Neither can motives be reduced to causes. In a causal relation, I can swap either of the terms for one which is in meaning coextensive with it. It is equally true to say that a spark caused an explosion as it is to say that an electric discharge caused a violent exothermic reaction. Not so in the case of motives. I can say that death of Polyneices motivated Antigone to defy Creon, but not that the cessation of the vital bodily processes of Polyneices motivated Antigone to defy Creon. The latter expression lacks the significance of the former. Equally importantly, causation lacks the for-the-sake-of structure motivation.

Just like subject turned out to be a derivative category grounded in more fundamental reality of the body, so reasons are similarly founded in a more primal type of effect which is motivation. Every propositional attitude I have is motivated by a wide collection of motives of various degrees of distinctness and presence in consciousness. Some of these motives could be made available in reflection and conceptually articulated. The vast majority of them, however, must remain occult, they form a mist of facticity which forms the atmosphere of one’s life and which is not capable of being made transparent.³⁴ In Merleau-Ponty’s own words, “*If it were possible to lay bare and unfold all the presuppositions in what I call my reason or my ideas at each moment, we should always find experience which have not been made explicit, large-scale contributions from past and present, a whole ‘sedimentary history’ which is not only relevant to the genesis of my thought, but which determines its significance.*” (PP 395) To attempt to articulate this collection of motives in the explicit form of form of reason “*I crystallize an indefinite collection of motives*”. (PP 295)

18. Some Connected Questions

At this point, I have finished explicating my understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s position in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Some fairly important issues had to be left out for the reasons of the restrictions of the format, but I do believe the interpretation which is in its outlines

³³ Merleau-Ponty calls this property the ‘reciprocity of motives’.

³⁴ For this reason, I consider Merleau-Ponty’s conception of motivation superior to that of Husserl and Stein, who both seem to think that this collection of motives is in its entirety capable of being made present in reflection. A claim which is so fundamental and so obviously wrong, that the mere fact that they seem to believe seems to me incongruent with the possibility of them having any serious insight into workings of the human mind.

Husserl: “*The ‘motives’ are often deeply buried but can be brought to light by ‘psychoanalysis’.*” (Ideas II)

Stein: “[w]ithin the lower levels [...] the motivations govern ‘in the dark’ and must first be brought to light by careful reflective analysis.” (Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities)

sketched above to be internally coherent and textually supported. There are however some connected questions which naturally occur to the reader but which, to my knowledge, are not overtly addressed in Merleau-Ponty's writings. I will take this silence as a license for greater interpretative liberty than I took thus far so understand this chapter as my speculation which might or might not agree with Merleau-Ponty's own ideas concerning these matters. I'm going to tackle here the two questions which I myself found most pressing.

My first question is, when all is said and done, is Merleau-Ponty a realist or an idealist? It might seem somewhat dubious to even attempt to fit such a highly idiosyncratic philosopher into these premade categories. Isn't there a danger of losing something valuable by making Merleau-Ponty conform to these classifications? I'm cognizant of these risks, but I do think that there is at least one important sense where we can give a resolute answer to this question. Since the bodily understanding, as we have seen, is not contained inside of the body or the mind alone but in the whole body-situation, the existence of the world falls outside of the set of things which can be sensibly subjected to doubt. Since we left the Cartesian picture, we are no longer subjected to the pull of solipsistic, relativistic, and skeptical conclusions which is inherent in it. To quote Charles Taylor once more, "*one awakens to an unproblematic realism, no longer a daring philosophical thesis*".³⁵ Or in Merleau-Ponty's own words, "[t]o ask whether the world is real is not to know what one is saying".³⁶

The second question concerns the status of the world *an sich* in Merleau-Ponty's picture. On this point, in the spirit of the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty is quite unclear and almost dismissive. I think that this attitude stems from fear that any outright admittance of the noumenal world would fit Merleau-Ponty's system into a broader Cartesian framework. I do not, however, see any way of avoiding the admittance of the world in itself into the picture.³⁷ It has to be there at least in two senses. First, as the substratum on which everything I have been talking about takes place. Second, it must have a presence in experience itself as the boundary condition, as the ultimate horizon, as that against which the body schema models itself and what thus limits the forms it can assume. The question remains open to what degree does this world in itself possess a structure which is then disclosed by the body schema and to what degree does the body schema project the structure onto it.

19. Chiasm of the Flesh

Despite the undeniable brilliance of the work, Merleau-Ponty did not think that the *Phenomenology of Perception* ultimately succeeds in formulating an alternative to the Cartesian framework. It fails to divorce itself resolutely enough from the old, theory laden conceptual apparatus, and as a result the whole picture is at bottom still cartesian. "*The problems posed in Phenomenology of Perception are insoluble because I start there from the 'consciousness' – 'object' distinction.*" (V&I 200) In this final chapter of the thesis, I would therefore like to

³⁵ Carman, T. and Hansen, M. (2005). *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.39.

³⁶ Carman, T. and Hansen, M. (2005). *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.40. (I was not able to find the original quote, although I'm reasonably sure it comes from *Phenomenology of Perception*)

³⁷ Husserl, at least in my reading, 'solved' the problem of the world *an sich* by adopting Hume's dictum that any concept whose roots cannot be traced to experience is illegitimate. I however cannot help the impression that there is something weaselly about this way of solving the conundrum.

move beyond *Phenomenology of Perception* and introduce, at least in rough outlines, the picture which Merleau-Ponty presents in his last, possibly his greatest and certainly his most difficult book: *The Visible and the Invisible*. I'm going to be drawing particularly on its last chapter, The Intertwining - The chiasm. The interpretative framework, which I once again borrow from Hubert Dreyfus, centers around the conviction that there is no radical discontinuity between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty is saying the same thing, he merely found a sharper, more adequate way of putting it.³⁸

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty drops the talk about body and world, which formed the basis of his analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in order to rid himself of the Cartesian baggage they bring with them, and instead talks only about the 'the flesh' (*la chair*). The flesh might be at once Merleau-Ponty's deepest and most original idea. It is also our central concern in this chapter. He himself considered it an important and novel innovation, "[there is] no name in traditional philosophy to designate it" (V&I 139). The flesh is a prototypal example of a chiasmic structure, so if we are to understand what precisely it refers to, we must first understand what is a chiasm.

There are two places where one can encounter the concept of chiasm. Its first use is in rhetoric where it designates a syntactical structure that could be symbolically expressed as A-B/B'-A'. The most famous example would probably be Kennedy's line "*ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country*". The second usage comes from the biology, where chiasm refers to the point of intersection of anatomical structures. For instance, the optical chiasm is the point of crossing of the fibers of optic nerves at the base of the brain.³⁹ It is pretty clear that Merleau-Ponty draws on both usages. There is some precedent for the use of the concept of chiasm in philosophy (notably in Heraclitus and Hegel) where it is usually employed in order to accent an underlying unity of opposites while maintaining their difference. This is certainly also the case with Merleau-Ponty.

Chiasm, as Merleau-Ponty uses the word, is a mediational structure between two terms which the western tradition often, but not always, understands in terms of opposition or dichotomy. It is not simply coincidentia oppositorum since although there definitely is a kind of unity which encompasses the two terms of the relation, the difference between them is not erased. I think that we can distinguish three main properties which characterize a chiasmic structure: ontological continuity, reversibility, and divergence. I will illustrate these with the most prototypal and illustrative example of chiasm which also happens to be of particular interest to us. The example I have in mind is one which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl's Ideas II, that of the left hand touching the right hand.

When I touch my right hand with my left, there is in each hand a sensation which is, in Husserl's words, apprehendable or experiencable in double way. A hand has the ability of being a sensory organ, of being that which does the sensing. But it also has the capacity to cross into the realm of things and become an object of the sensing, a sensible. In our case, it is the sensing and the sensible which form the chiasmic structure. When you touch one of your hands with the other, the first thing to notice is that it is impossible to say where precisely does the sensing of the one end and the being sensed of the other begin. There is a blurring of boundaries between them, an 'encroachment' or an 'infringement' of one into the other. That is to say, there is no discontinuity between them, they do not neatly fit each into its own category, the sentient and

³⁸ Dreyfus puts this idea forward in his 13th lecture on Merleau-Ponty.

³⁹ Although, to be completely accurate, the rhetorical device is usually designated as chiasmus and the anatomical structure as chiasma.

the sensed are ontologically continuous. This ontological continuity is a necessary condition for touch (as well as for any other sense). The sentient, if it is to be sentient, must have place among the things that are capable of being sensed. “[H]e who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it.” (V&I 134) “If [the body] touches [things] and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs [...]” (V&I 137). Next thing to notice is that is that if you apply a little effort, you can reverse the relationship, make the sensing hand into the sensed hand and vice versa. What you cannot do, however, is to sense the sensing that was going on just a second ago going on in the other hand. The moment you make the sensed hand into the one which does the sensing, the other automatically switches also. You are continually on the verge of sensing the sensing itself but this never actually comes about. “[I]t is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence.” (V&I 147) There is an unbridgeable gap and the moment you would sense the right hand as the sensing, a divergence takes place and the right hand takes its place among the sensibles. These three features: ontological continuity (or encroachment), reversibility, and divergence are the defining features of chiasmic structures.

Surprisingly enough, you don’t actually need two hands to perform this experiment. You can replace one with an inanimate object, say, a wall. Our descriptive analysis will still hold without any changes. If you touch a wall, you can undergo the same kind of reversion, make the wall into the sensing organ and the hand into the sensible and literally feel your hand with the wall. This chiasmic structure between the body and the world is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the flesh. Between the body and the world there is an ontological continuity, there is a unity which gets doubled into the flesh of the body and flesh of the world. The boundary between them is not clear, they encroach into each other, they intermingle and intertwine and together, they form a “*couple more real than either of them*” (V&I 139).

This kind of relation is not particular to the relation between the body and the world or the sensing and the sensible. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty comes to see it absolutely everywhere: between mind and body, self and other⁴⁰, fact and idea, silence and speech, imaginary and real, past and present, philosophy and non-philosophy, ... He even comes to call Philosophy the “*chiasm of chiasms, central chiasm*”⁴¹.

This brief exposition of the concepts of flesh and chiasm is hopelessly insufficient to adequately explain these difficult terms and for more in rigorous treatment I would point the reader to Fred

⁴⁰ In his 1951 essay titled *Man and Adversity* Merleau-Ponty quotes a passage from Valéry as the place where he originally got the idea. This quote can itself be quite illuminating so I will reproduce it here. The situation which Valéry describes is that of eyes of one person meeting another’s:

“No one could think freely if his eyes did not take leave of different eyes which followed them. As soon as glances meet, we are no longer wholly two, and it is hard to remain alone. This exchange realizes in a very short time a transposition or metathesis – a chiasma of two “destinies,” two points of view. Thereby a sort of simultaneous reciprocal limitations occurs. You capture my image, my appearance; I capture yours. You are not me, since you see me and I do not see myself. What I lack is this me that you see. And what you lack is the you I see. And no matter how far we advance in our mutual understanding, as much as we reflect, so much will we be different.”

⁴¹ Luft, S. and Overgaard, S. (2014). *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. pp. 340. (I was unable to find the original quote)

Evans' chapter in the book *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts* titled 'Chiasm and flesh'⁴² or Ted Toadvine's chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* titled 'The Chiasm'⁴³.

20. Conclusion

Our primary aim in this thesis was to understand Merleau-Ponty's views as he presents them in his most famous book, *Phenomenology of Perception*. We started by framing Merleau-Ponty's system in terms of phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. The central claim of our interpretation was that Merleau-Ponty adopts Heideggerian framework and within it he restates the old Gestaltist insights, which they were themselves unable to adequately articulate. We framed his project in terms of three goals: to provide a faithful description of the structures of the phenomenal field, to find an alternative for the Cartesian framework, and to solve the problem of the grounds of reason. We then laid out a view of the phenomenal field at the bottom of which there is an unceasing striving towards an optimal organization, towards the maximum grip on the world. We saw that perception is an essentially bodily process in which the whole body comes to terms with the object and with it forms a synergistic system. On the one side of this process is body's assumption of certain specific pattern of muscular tensions and on the other the thing's coming into being as a fully articulated stable substance with constant properties. We saw that to accurately formulate these insights, we need to leave the Cartesian conceptual apparatus and reframe the debate in terms of new ontological category, which is the body. Finally, we moved beyond *Phenomenology of Perception* to the culmination of Merleau-Ponty's efforts which is the concept of the flesh.

For further study, I would suggest looking into the aspects of Merleau-Ponty's system as presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*, which I was forced to leave out for the purpose of time and space. By this, I mean primarily temporality, tacit cogito, freedom, sexuality and intersubjectivity. I would also point the reader towards *The Visible and Invisible* since it is an extremely interesting book and my brief treatment does not do it justice. For myself, I'm hoping to be able to return in the future to the question of the relationship between the phenomenal field and the underlying brain processes. The American psychologist James J. Gibson is of particular interest to me in this regard. I would also like to make sense of the question of the world as such and find an interpretation of it which does not only refit Merleau-Ponty into a broader Cartesian picture.

⁴² Diprose, R. and Reynolds, J. (2014). *Merleau-Ponty*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. pp.184-196.

⁴³ Luft, S. and Overgaard, S. (2014). *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. pp.336-347.

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