Merleau-Ponty, Naturalism and Phenomenological Ontology

by

Christopher Pollard, BA (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University

September 2013
I am the author of the thesis entitled 'Merleau-Ponty, Naturalism and Phenomenological Ontology' submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

This thesis may be made available for consultation, loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: CHRISTOPHER POLLARD

(Please Print)

Signed: [Signature]

Date: 24/2/2014
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis entitled ‘Merleau-Ponty, Naturalism and Phenomenological Ontology’, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: Christopher Pollard

Signed: [Signature]

Date: 4 September 2013
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my principal supervisor Matthew Sharpe for his patient advice and guidance throughout a project that had many ups and downs. Matthew’s encouragement as a supervisor, practice as a scholar and rigorous, humane and open-minded approach to philosophical questions allowed me the opportunity to explore the ‘big questions’ raised in this thesis, and provided me with an exemplary model to emulate. I am most grateful for the mentoring that I received from him. I would also like to express my gratitude for the invaluable guidance offered by my associate supervisor Stan Van Hooft. Stan’s reading of drafts and his incisive and challenging feedback was crucial to improving the overall direction and coherence of the project. I am most grateful for his generosity with his time and for the wise counsel that I received from him.

I would like to thank Deakin University for supporting me with a Deakin University Postgraduate Research Scholarship and with funding to attend conferences in Australia and in the U.K.

I was first encouraged to read Merleau-Ponty as an undergrad at Melbourne University by my inspiring social theory lecturer, John Rundell. But it was in the classes of my equally inspiring philosophy lecturer Katrine Keuneman that I first studied *Phenomenology of Perception*, and I thank her for those great classes and for her supervision of my honours thesis.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to go to Warwick University as a visiting fellow in 2008, and I would like to thank Stephen Houlgate and Warwick University for giving me that opportunity. I would particularly like to thank A.D. Smith who generously gave of his time to advise me about my project at a time when I was still struggling to comprehend the full significance of phenomenological philosophy.

Other people who I have discussed the project with and whose advice and insight I have benefited from are my second associate supervisor, Russell Grigg, as well as Maurita Harney, Andrea Rehberg and my good friends and colleagues David Waldron, Luke Kelly and Tim Andrews.

Strobe Driver, Deb Watkins and Patrick Cook offered me intellectual inspiration, friendship and emotional support in tough times, something that I consider myself most fortunate to have benefited from. Janet Lowndes initially encouraged me to pursue undergraduate studies. I learned a great deal from her and without her love and support this journey may never have gotten under way.

I would also like to thank my parents Brian Pollard and Carole Pollard, and also Tracey Pace and Paul Boreland, for all of their love and support over the years. Without their care and understanding I would never have been able to complete this project.

Finally, I would like to thank my beautiful partner Nicole Davis. Her skilful editing and proofing was vital to the thesis achieving its final polished form. Her love, kindness and support continue to inspire me and to bring me joy in the present and give me hope for the future.
# Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality .................................................................................. ii  
Declaration of Originality .................................................................................. iii  
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................. iv  
Abstract .............................................................................................................. 1  
Introduction ......................................................................................................... 3  

1. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 3  
2. A Note on Methodology ................................................................................. 11  
3. My Critical Targets: Recent Misreadings ..................................................... 16  
   3.1 Misreading Merleau-Ponty for Cognitive Science ..................................... 22  
   3.2 Problems in Recent Anglophone Merleau-Ponty Scholarship and the  
       Need for a Corrective ‘Counter-Reading’ ............................................... 33  
       3.2.1 Problem 1: Phenomenological Reduction ....................................... 34  
       3.2.2 Problem 2: Transcendentalism ....................................................... 35  
       3.2.3 Problem 3: Dialectics ................................................................... 37  
4. The Structure of the Thesis ............................................................................. 41  

Chapter 1: Merleau-Ponty’s Existential Phenomenology: Theory and  
Method .............................................................................................................. 49  

1. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 49  
2. Merleau-Ponty’s General Conception of Phenomenological  
Philosophy ...................................................................................................... 51  
   2.1 Phenomenological Description, Scientific Explanation and  
       Reflective Analysis .............................................................................. 51
3. The Phenomenological Reduction and its Consequences ............ 67

3.1 The Phenomenological Reduction Reveals a Lived Body that
Necessarily Inheres in a Concrete Situation .......................... 72

3.2 Husserl’s Intellectualist and Idealist Presuppositions Inconsistent
with the Phenomenology of the Perceived World ..................... 79

4. Correcting Recent Confusions in the Literature ..................... 84

5. Conclusion ........................................................................... 101

Chapter 2: Intentionality, Ontology and Scientism ......................... 104

1. Introduction ........................................................................... 104

2. Motor-intentionality and Existential Structure ...................... 105

2.2 Motor-intentionality, Body Schema and Ontology ............... 121

3. The Necessity of Existentialism – the Philosophy of Concrete Human
Existence ...................................................................................... 124

4. Existentialism is a Naturalism … but not a Scientism ............... 129

4.1 The ‘Naturalisation of Phenomenology’ Project and the Cognitive
Sciences ....................................................................................... 131

Chapter 3: Merleau-Ponty as Transcendental Philosopher .......... 156

1. Introduction ........................................................................... 156

2. Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendentalism ..................................... 160

2.1 Transcendental Method in Phenomenology of Perception ....... 170

2. Merleau-Ponty as Transcendental Idealist: A Critical Analysis ..... 178

3. Why Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Analyses Decisively
Undermine Intellectualist Transcendental Philosophy ............... 194

4. Conclusion ........................................................................... 201
Abstract

This thesis presents an interpretation of the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position in *Phenomenology of Perception* in the face of two tendencies in recent Anglophone scholarship to mischaracterise his position. The first tendency comes from the recent movement for an embodied cognitive science, which reads his phenomenology of the lived body as convergent with a scientistic version of naturalism. The second concerns a set of readers who, while grasping the transcendental dimension, read him either too closely to Kant, as a new kind of transcendental idealist, too closely to Husserl, when interpreting his conception of the phenomenological reduction, or too closely to Hegel, due to his use of an ‘existential dialectic’. In place of these readings I present an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology as a form of liberal naturalism that rejects the scientism of the embodied cognitive science movement and puts in its place a methodology that is both phenomenological and transcendental.

My critical analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist position argues that recent readings of him as a transcendental idealist are mistaken and that he is correctly read as a liberal naturalist who advocates a transcendental methodology, eschewing a transcendental metaphysics. Further, I argue that recent scholars have not adequately understood the way in which he combines the Hegelian concept of dialectics with an existential ontological framework, presenting an alternative view that identifies three principal and connected uses of ‘dialectic’ in *Phenomenology of Perception*. I also argue that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of phenomenological reduction has been mischaracterised in some of the recent literature, and argue for a view of the reduction as a ‘purgative operation’ that seeks to eliminate the objectivism of the natural attitude at its root in the structure of perception itself.

Finally, some criticisms of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of ‘the primacy of perception’ are advanced, and a way around them is sketched. I argue that, in not satisfactorily working out his position on the perception/language relation, Merleau-Ponty fails to account for the structuring role of deep linguistic/cultural contexts that shape our perceptual experience. The upshot of this is that while Merleau-Ponty’s
position represents a powerful critique of, and viable alternative to, scientistic naturalism, the ‘philosophical status’ that he attributes to our ‘direct and primitive contact with the world’ ought to be modified to incorporate the full implications of the hermeneutic depth that sustained phenomenological analysis itself has enabled us to see.
Introduction

1. Introduction

This thesis presents a reading of Merleau-Ponty as a liberal naturalist philosopher. Liberal naturalist positions reject supernatural entities, for example spirits or Cartesian minds, and supernatural faculties of knowing, such as mystical insight and spiritual intuition. However, they also reject a view that they refer to as ‘scientism’. Scientism claims that the experimental and theoretical methods of the natural sciences are our most reliably knowledge-conducive practices, and that, therefore, any viable ontological claims must be formulated in terms of the entities, forces and causal processes that the natural sciences posit in their theories. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy represents a deeply principled rejection of this scientistic form of naturalism, arguing that the sciences are incapable, in principle, of providing us with a philosophical understanding of the nature of human experience and of existence generally. For this, he argues, we need to undertake a comprehensive and painstaking phenomenological analysis of our lived experience. The ‘lived and perceived world … must be described for itself’ because by doing this ‘philosophy rediscovers a “thickness” and a relation with concrete problems it had lost when it became pure reflection on science’.

---

The purpose of this analysis is to bring to light just those all-pervasive aspects of ‘the human order’ – the human level of consciousness, intentionality, meaning and normativity – that scientistic naturalism ‘represses’. And it is Merleau-Ponty’s view that scientistic naturalism must ‘repress’ lived consciousness in its pursuit of the goal of what he calls an ‘objectivist’ account of the world of nature and of the objects it contains, such as human beings. This ‘objective thought’ is so-called because it takes as its ontological model the ‘world of objects’, which it understands as ultimately consisting of mutually exterior parts. Merleau-Ponty, in reference to Descartes, often uses the Latin phrase *partes extra partes* as shorthand for the idea that the parts that comprise the wholes that we experience are understood as having an external independent existence – without interdependence. They are thus subject-independent and atomistic. ‘The definition of the object’, he says, ‘is … that it exists *partes extra partes*, and that consequently it acknowledges between its parts, or between itself and other objects only external and mechanical relationships.’ The idea that the world is comprised of mutually exterior parts is one of the two key components of what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘objective thought’ (also ‘objectivism’). The other key idea is what he calls ‘the prejudice of determinate being’. To hold the prejudice of determinate being is to unjustifiably presuppose the existence of a determinate world – a world consisting of a totality of determinate three-dimensional spatio-temporal objects with determinate properties and their relations. On this view, to use Joseph Margolis’ phrase, the world is both ‘determinate and knowable as

---

5 Ibid. p.84.
6 Ibid. p.xxii.
7 Ibid. p.59. He also calls it the ‘prejudice in favour of an objective world’, p.7.
Merleau-Ponty argues that this is an unjustified ‘prejudice’ about what the world is like that results from a mischaracterisation of the lived world of our perceptual experience.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy runs fundamentally counter to this ‘objectivism’ and it is his goal in *Phenomenology of Perception* to convince his reader of the deep conceptual confusion at the core of the scientistic project. Merleau-Ponty argues in favour of a methodology that is both *phenomenological*, in the sense of a systematic description of the structure of lived experience, and *transcendental*, in the sense of asking fundamental questions about the conditions of possibility for our lived experience. He also argues for an ontology that is ‘*existential*’, in the sense of articulating the concrete structures of being that such a methodology uncovers. What this position amounts to is the subject of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Merleau-Ponty’s version of liberal naturalism is, in one sense, as liberal as a version of naturalism can get. For example, he has a conception of the sciences that is broad enough to include the human sciences (e.g. sociology and linguistics), but nevertheless holds that a transcendental perspective is the only way to get a sufficient understanding of the human level and to formulate plausible ontological claims.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is anti-reductionist and anti-objectivist in a way that repudiates the traditional formulation of the mind-body problem and thus its erstwhile solutions: dualism and monism. Scientistic thinkers in the cognitive sciences and in philosophy of mind are motivated by the problem of ontological

---

dualism. Traditional dualists argue that ‘the mind’ and the material world are two fundamentally different substances (substance dualism). Contemporary dualists, by contrast, argue that the material world somehow has two fundamentally different types of properties: mental properties and physical properties (property dualism). Monists argue that there exists only one fundamental type of substance: physical substance (physicalists). Occasionally, in opposition, it is argued that everything that exists is in some degree mental (panpsychism). Merleau-Ponty rejects all of these ‘solutions’ and the Cartesian problematic that gives rise to them, arguing that the phenomenology of embodied perceptual experience demonstrably undermines any sharp subject/object dichotomy.

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology might be described as ‘post-objectivist’. This is demonstrated in his view that the commitment – either explicit or implicit – to an ontology modelled on the ‘world of objects’, understood as consisting of ‘mutually exterior parts’, is fundamentally incoherent. This objectivist ontology, he argues, underpins any philosophy that models itself on the natural sciences, as well as being the implicit ontology of the natural sciences themselves. The fundamental incoherence lies in the fact that it is unable, in principle, to cope with the phenomena

---

of meaningful lived experience within its conceptual framework. As such, Merleau-Ponty’s position is a deep-rooted anti-scientism, whilst at the same time being a principled rejection of any kind of super- or extra-natural theoretical moves. It is for this reason that the position that he calls ‘existential phenomenology’, which embodies a genuinely phenomenological approach to ontology (a ‘phenomenological ontology’), qualifies as a liberal naturalism.

Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental critique of ‘objectivism’ is at odds with the scientistic naturalism that arises out of the attempt to transform the insights of the natural sciences into naturalistic positions in philosophy. His appraisal of the role of the sciences shares some important common ground with the Deweyan pragmatist account. Chiefly, it shares the view that it is not the explicit theoretical content of the various sciences that is of most importance but rather the general experimentalist approach that they all share. To be experimentalist in this general sense is to appreciate the open-endedness and the interpretative dimension of enquiry. This is evident, says Merleau-Ponty, in the fact that when we focus on our experience we find that it is necessarily situated in a context, or ‘world’. This necessary situatedness is what he calls a fundamental ‘existential structure’. Enquirers are invited by this most basic structure of our experience to be experimentalist because in any attempt to deepen knowledge our necessary situatedness in a context means that we must attempt to grasp a world that always in principle exceeds our total grasp. This is

---

13 This point has been argued in: Sandra Rosenthal and Patrick Bourgeois, Pragmatism and Phenomenology: A Philosphic Encounter (The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1980).
because it is only in our exploration of the world via the finite and limited capacities of our perceiving body that we can come to know anything about it.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological epistemology in *Phenomenology of Perception* rests on the view that he famously refers to as ‘the primacy of perception’\(^1\). This view holds that being is revealed to us directly in our pre-objective lived perceptual experience and that it is this primordial level of experience that we need an account of, giving it a ‘philosophical status’, as he puts it\(^15\). The provision of this account will thus enable us to articulate a phenomenological ontology. Such an ontology will draw on a ‘transcendental attitude’\(^16\) – that is a transcendental methodology – whilst eschewing a transcendental metaphysics.

Scientific theorising, both in the sciences and in scientistic naturalist philosophy, argues Merleau-Ponty, is unable to cope with the fundamental phenomena of our intrinsically and irreducibly meaningful intentional consciousness. This is because it involves a way of theorising that rests on a process of progressive abstraction away from the very basis on which such abstraction is built – lived perceptual experience – and from which it derives its meaning\(^17\). Thus, he argues that this kind of theorising is not just reductionist at times. Rather, it is intrinsically reductionist at an ontological level as it must inevitably empty our lived experience.


\(^15\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii. ‘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 …’: Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences’, p.25.

\(^16\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.69.

of its intentional content in order to fit it into an abstracted theoretical framework – the ‘objectivist’ framework of scientistic naturalism\textsuperscript{18}.

In contrast to objectivist accounts that attempt to explain perception in terms of atomistic ‘sense data’\textsuperscript{19}, Merleau-Ponty proposes a phenomenological theory of the irreducibility of meaningful perceptual experience. This thesis is coupled with a claim about the inability of a scientific approach to address the problem of consciousness without destroying the very phenomenon they seek to understand through the application of scientific methods to it. In \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} he puts the point in the following unequivocal way:

How significance and intentionality could come to dwell in molecular edifices of cells is a thing that can never be made comprehensible … But there is, in any case, no question of any such absurd undertaking. It is simply that the question of recognizing the body as a chemical structure or agglomeration of tissues, is formed by a process of impoverishment from a primordial-body-for-us\textsuperscript{20}.

\textsuperscript{18} I will be exploring Merleau-Ponty’s views on this issue in subsequent chapters, especially Chapter 2.
\textsuperscript{19} Sense-data theories hold that ‘sensations’ are the basic element in perception and go on to postulate some type of psychological process involving learning, memory and association in order to account for the perception we have on the basis of the sensations. Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenological description exposes these theories as making a fundamental ‘experience error’. That is, they attribute to experience what their theoretical commitments antecedently commit them to find here. But such atomistic pure sensations are not what we find in experience, they are a theoretical construct that is superimposed onto the irreducibly holistic structure of perceptual experience. See: Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, pp.3-14.
\textsuperscript{20} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.409.
The body is the crucial focal point that Merleau-Ponty believes demonstrates the intrinsic limits of scientistic naturalism. Our ‘primordial-body-for-us’ is not the body conceived of as just another object in a world understood as a ‘totality of objects’ but rather is our phenomenologically ‘lived through’ body. The primary and foundational perceptual experience of our ‘lived through’ body is abstracted away from in order to conceptualise it scientifically as an object like any other. However, this move undermines the possibility of accounting for the structures of meaning that have their basis in that very primary and foundational perceptual experience. Thus, as Scott Aikin aptly puts it:

… we not only do damage to those structures as structures of meaning (in that it becomes unclear how they mean), but we also strip them of meaning altogether (in that they no longer are intentional). The mind, intentionality, our structures of meaning must be understood from the inside.

In its attempt at a fully scientific theory, the kind of naturalism that Merleau-Ponty resists requires that we view our bodies and practices from a third-person point of view. They thus fail to account for the intentional phenomenological perspective, what Merleau-Ponty discusses in terms of the ‘internality’ of intentional relations, and so fail to explain this essential dimension of the human.

---

23 e.g. ‘To the degree that the motivated phenomenon comes into being, an internal relation to the motivating phenomenon appears …’: Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.58.
24 I will be describing Merleau-Ponty’s account of intentional consciousness in Chapter 1 and especially in Chapter 2.
2. A Note on Methodology

The scope of my study of Merleau-Ponty extends from the period of his first book, *The Structure of Behaviour* (written 1938, published 1942), through to the end of the ‘Sorbonne period’ in 1952\(^2\). In the thesis I will focus primarily on his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), as this is his sustained statement of his existential phenomenological position. Some would argue that the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not represent Merleau-Ponty's fully matured philosophical views, and thus it is unfair to him to treat the theory of perception and ontology developed there to the exclusion of his later ontology of the ‘flesh’. To this I respond that the position that Merleau-Ponty adopts in his later writings is not independent from that adopted in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. And this is the case in such a way that, as regards the debate between scientistic naturalism and phenomenological ontology, the relevant moves have already been made in the period up to 1952. Thus, despite his taking of a second – again Heidegger-inspired – ‘turn’, the position outlined in the *Phenomenology* is the appropriate place to focus the debate *vis-à-vis* the relationship between phenomenology and scientistic naturalism.

The challenge I have set myself in this thesis is to explicate Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position on its own terms in order to explore the full significance of its challenge to a group who, even when interested in his phenomenology of

---

embodiment, stand in either explicit or implicit opposition to his existential ontology – namely scientistic naturalists. Interpreting Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is notoriously difficult. This difficulty can be highlighted in the following way. If asked what problems *Phenomenology of Perception* addresses, it is impossible to deny that it is intended to directly address issues in phenomenology, epistemology and metaphysics, and, slightly less directly, in ethics. But it is also hard to deny that it is intended to have a relevance to literally everything, including politics, history, aesthetics and logic. It is a holistic philosophy and as such there is nothing that it leaves untouched. This is because it is, in the tradition of post-Kantian Continental philosophy, proposing not just a new theory within a more or less established set of parameters for theory construction. Rather, it seeks to reconfigure those very parameters, thus proposing a new approach to *doing philosophy*.

Consequently there is no shortage of large claims and large goals in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but how are we to assess their achievement? The answer to this question must be the same as to any other philosophy that takes rationality seriously, and that is via comprehensive argumentative demonstration. Despite his lyrical style, Merleau-Ponty clearly understands his philosophy to involve arguments, and the arguments for his main claims can be extrapolated from his texts – even at points where they are not fully provided. And Merleau-Ponty scholars have self-consciously and systematically used this kind of approach in the interpretation of his work.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) They do not, however, always arrive at the same general interpretation. In this regard compare Stephen Priest’s book *Merleau-Ponty*, (London: Routledge, 1998) with Michael Hammond, Jane
One potential problem of relevance to the methodology of the present project comes from a concern Dermot Moran raises in his review of Stephen Priest’s *Merleau-Ponty*, written for the ‘Arguments of the Philosophers’ series. In critiquing the analytical nature of Priest’s presentation of Merleau-Ponty’s position, Moran asserts that ‘reading Merleau-Ponty through the prism of his “arguments” may not necessarily do full justice to his ambiguous, evolving thought’27. The basic problem to which Moran draws our attention is that ‘if individual sentences are abstracted from Merleau-Ponty’s limpid prose and treated as categorical assertions in a chain of arguments, then much of his subtlety and ambiguity is lost’28. The result is that our attempted extrapolations might instead turn out as ‘wooden reductions’, even ‘misrepresentations’29.

Now doing ‘full justice’ to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘ambiguous, evolving thought’ is indeed a tall order. For if it is the case that reading him with an eye for the content of his claims, and the argumentative demonstration for them, is not enough to give him a just exposition, then it is not clear that any philosopher could ever achieve this. However, it is obvious that a philosopher who attempts to reconfigure the very meaning and practice of philosophy in the fundamental way that Merleau-Ponty does is under a particularly serious obligation to provide argumentation for such radical manoeuvres. In light of this obligation, the question of whether or not that individual

---

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid. This is Moran’s charge against Priest’s attempt to cast Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy into a more formal style of argument.
or his followers feel that they have been done full justice is not the crucial issue. This is because those individuals adhere to the radically reconfigured conception of philosophy that those views instantiate. Now to those for whom the status of this new conception is not a fait accompli, the important point is that the author is given an attentive and thorough reading before any assessment is undertaken. For, if we seek to undertake such an assessment, it is incumbent upon us to give these views a sufficiently attentive and cognisant reading, or else that assessment cannot meaningfully claim to be of the relevant views in question. Thus, reading Merleau-Ponty for his arguments is surely the appropriate way to proceed if we wish to assess the meaning and validity of his philosophical claims. However, in doing so we must constantly be aware that he has a style of expressing his arguments that is not straightforwardly translatable into a more formal style of argument. It is, therefore, unreasonable to assume that his philosophy ought to be reconstructable in the rigorous logical style that analytical philosophers like Priest favour. To emphasise, this is firstly because Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is principally descriptive, and secondly because he holds that what is fundamentally uncovered via his descriptive procedure – the level of pre-objective perception – is intrinsically ambiguous and, therefore, not capable of being ‘further clarified by analysis’\(^{30}\).

Thus, in order to fully capture Merleau-Ponty’s meaning, it will not be enough to read Merleau-Ponty ‘from the outside’, as Monika Langer puts it. This is a process that ‘merely serves to confirm us in our prejudices’ as we ‘sift out and translate ‘the interesting bits’ into unambiguous philosophical terminology before

---

submitting them to closer scrutiny. This *modus operandi* inevitably ‘misses the … essence of the *Phenomenology* altogether. Instead, in reading Merleau-Ponty’s thought we must, as Langer advises, render ‘ourselves genuinely present to its presence in the text itself’, leaving our ‘various assumptions behind’ as we ‘open ourselves to the text’. Given this, I seek to be mindful of the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s position emerges throughout the text as a result of the ‘wide-ranging nature of [his] presentation’ and ‘his complicated dialectical writing style’. As such, I take the view that his position is, strictly speaking, contained in a network of statements that build up to an overall general picture – like a painting or a symphony – rather than in an explicit chain of logically connected propositions that develop in a linear fashion displaying unambiguously what he is really committed to.

It follows from this view that, in the interest of giving a fair-minded presentation of Merleau-Ponty’s views, we must be careful not to distil the meaning of particular assertions or strands within his thought in such a way that we create a reductive ‘analytical’ Merleau-Ponty. In this thesis I seek to create a Merleau-Ponty that is constructed out of the general patterns of his theoretical claims and his arguments for them (and their general patterns).

---

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid. p.156.
35 This concern has been raised about Priest’s book by both Dermot Moran and Duane Davis: Duane Davis, ‘Review of *Merleau-Ponty* by Stephen Priest’, p. 192. It has also been voiced by Jack Reynolds, in relation to *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, who argues that the book ‘privileges the aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s work that are most capable of recuperation within the analytic tradition’. Jack Reynolds, ‘Review of *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty***, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (September 2005), http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24859-the-cambridge-companion-to-merleau-ponty/
The problem with an analytical approach is in the particular way that it distils the arguments, not that it attempts to distil them. For without such extrapolations how could we suppose that, for example, scientistic naturalists might come to see the incoherence of their scientism and the validity of an existential phenomenological approach on rational grounds?

Finally, as Moran has observed, it can be ‘exceptionally difficult to be precise about what Merleau-Ponty is actually defending’\(^{36}\). In his words, this is because Merleau-Ponty’s ‘emphasis on the ambiguity and dialectics of our relation with the world is mirrored in the ambiguity and vagueness of his own writing’\(^{37}\). Merleau-Ponty himself is not always precise about what he is defending. And this fact, therefore, necessitates an exegetically cautious and attentive approach in order to further clarify just what that amounts to.

3. My Critical Targets: Recent Misreadings

In attempting an attentive and cautious exegesis I have necessarily consulted the secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty. One of the problems with this literature is the marked tendency to read him through, and thus too closely to, other thinkers. For example, his key theoretical claims are sometimes read through Kant\(^{38}\) or Husserl\(^{39}\).

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
The practice of reading Merleau-Ponty through other thinkers indicates a view of
him – either explicitly or implicitly held – as essentially a thinker who builds on the
work of others in a derivative fashion. However, I contend that this view is
mistaken and results from his confusion-courtinpractice of appropriating the
terminology of other thinkers without fully explicating the nature of that
appropriation. For example, we seldom see in Merleau-Ponty’s writings an explicit
account, in terms of the similarities and differences between the original and the
appropriated usage, of key terms like ‘transcendental’ or ‘dialectics’.

In the secondary literature Merleau-Ponty has been most commonly read as
an existentialist; however, it is my contention that fleshing out exactly what this
means for him is yet to fully be done. This can be seen by the fact that there is not
really an orthodox reading of Merleau-Ponty’s basic philosophical position but rather
a tendency to construct ‘Merleau-Pontys’ for particular purposes. For example, one
strand emphasises the social and historical dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s thought,
often in contrast to Sartre’s claims about absolute freedom and his account of the
master/slave dialectic in social relations. Another strand emphasises his
phenomenological account of perception and of the ‘lived body’ as a way to

---


overcome representationalist epistemology\textsuperscript{42}. Still others emphasise that his phenomenological account of embodied perception is precisely what is needed to rescue the project of the cognitive sciences from their overly mentalistic and disembodied models of human cognition\textsuperscript{43}.

Merleau-Ponty’s work has often been presented as an extension of Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, as the fourth placeholder of the canonical classical phenomenologists – the one who properly brings the body into the picture, building on Heidegger’s existential critique of Husserl and Sartre’s phenomenology of concrete embodied social relations. While this is not an unfair characterisation, I want to argue that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position is emphatically more than a straightforward extension. This is because in his appropriation of key technical terms from Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger he \textit{transforms} those terms, synthesising them into a unique theory that is sufficiently original to merit treatment as a separate and distinct position. This treatment must not interpret his claims simply through Heidegger, Husserl or Sartre but rather \textit{on their own terms} as comprising a unique phenomenological ontology.

Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the technical terms of preceding canonical figures encourages, quite understandably, the reading of him through the figures who


innovated the key terms that he appropriates. However, to do this is to fail to see the way in which the terms have been transformed and thus to misread him. The tendency to read him through preceding canonical figures contributes to the secondary literature being a plural and contested space\textsuperscript{44}. This is no bad thing in itself; in fact it can be seen as evidence of the creative and vivifying power of Merleau-Ponty’s work. However, there are certain interpretations in some of the recent secondary literature that misunderstand his central theoretical claims and, thus, ought to be corrected. These interpretative errors cannot be remedied by reading Merleau-Ponty through other canonical figures but only by reading him as an original and groundbreaking thinker in his own right.

The argument of this thesis has two critical targets. The first is the most striking illustration of a confusion that develops due to the pattern of reading Merleau-Ponty for a particular purpose rather than on his own terms. This target comprises a set of theorists who use Merleau-Ponty in the cognitive sciences. These theorists argue for an embodied approach to cognitive science, and see recent work in the cognitive sciences as standing in a relationship of convergence and complementarity with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work. What I argue against my first target is that these uses involve a tacit ‘scientisation’ of his phenomenology. That is, they tacitly morph Merleau-Ponty’s view to fit within the objectivist framework that necessarily underpins their project for an embodied cognitive science. As a result of this they miss the philosophical significance of his phenomenological claims, which is to argue that his phenomenology of perceptual

\textsuperscript{44} See e.g: Reynolds, ‘Review of The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty’.
experience, rather than being convergent with the project of the cognitive sciences, in fact demonstrates its inability to deal with the phenomenon of consciousness.

The second target is largely an instantiation of the pattern of reading Merleau-Ponty through other canonical thinkers rather than on his own terms. This target comprises a set of recent readings of Merleau-Ponty that understand that he is explicitly and deeply critical of the philosophical presuppositions of the cognitive sciences, and that instead he offers a transcendental philosophical account. Despite this, they misunderstand key aspects of his account. For example, Stephen Priest, Taylor Carman and Joel Smith fail to properly grasp Merleau-Ponty’s unique conception of the phenomenological reduction, reading him through – and too closely to – either Husserl (Priest and Smith) or Heidegger (Carman). Sebastian Gardner and Thomas Baldwin, for their part, misinterpret Merleau-Ponty’s unique conception of a transcendental method, reading him through – and too closely to – Kant.

Some authors attempt to explicate Merleau-Ponty without mention of the central role of dialectics in his thinking. Others acknowledge, but struggle to articulate, his relation to Hegel and dialectics, failing to properly grasp Merleau-Ponty’s complex conception of an existential dialectic (Sebastian Gardner, John

---

Russon⁴⁷, Taylor Carman, Stephen Priest). In each case, I will argue, these misunderstandings result from the reader’s failure to comprehend the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s existential position.

The process of exploring where and why the authors that comprise our two critical targets go wrong will necessarily involve an exegetical clarification of the meaning of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The goal of this exegesis is to present a reading of Merleau-Ponty that will serve to demonstrate, via textual explication, the claims that I assert as to what Merleau-Ponty’s position amounts to, and why these recent scholars have missed crucial aspects of this position. On the whole then, this exegetical and critical work will help to provide us with a clear picture of:

a) the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s deep challenge to scientistic naturalism; and

b) the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to contemporary debates in the area of epistemology and ontology.

### 3.1 Misreading Merleau-Ponty for Cognitive Science

The best place for me to start the exploration of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is with a preliminary discussion of the recent use of his phenomenology in the context of the new interdisciplinary projects of the cognitive sciences. The purpose of this discussion is to provide a strong motivation for a deeper exploration of his

position by sketching a use of his work that, I will argue, runs in diametrical opposition to his considered theoretical stance. Starting with his use in the cognitive science field, I will indicate precisely why a fuller exploration of his philosophical commitments is required.

Theorists in the new interdisciplinary projects of the cognitive sciences take themselves to be in the business of constructing the first plausible scientific theory of consciousness. There has been a recent increase of interest in the role of the phenomenology of embodied perception by a group of theorists referred to as ‘post-cognitivists’. The term ‘post-cognitivism’ refers to a group of approaches in the cognitive sciences that argue for a vindication of the role of embodiment in the understanding of cognition. As Paco Calvo and Toni Gomila put it:

At a minimum, all these approaches conceive of cognition and behaviour in terms of the dynamical interaction (coupling) of an embodied system that is embedded into the surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{48}

The key themes are ‘embodiment’ and environmental ‘embeddedness’. For our purposes, this enthusiastic use of Merleau-Ponty’s work raises important questions about these readings and the philosophical import they take Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to have. In cognitive science, and in much philosophy of mind, Merleau-Ponty is read as offering a theory of perception consisting of a set of phenomenological descriptions, and a set of arguments derivable from them, that

converges with work in the empirical cognitive sciences and in contemporary philosophy of mind – for example regarding the intimate interdependence of perception and action, the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience and the irreducibility of bodily perception\textsuperscript{49}.

These readers of Merleau-Ponty are often said to be involved in what is referred to as a ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’. The term ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ refers to the project – however tentative – of attempting to bridge the ‘explanatory gap’ that exists between phenomenological accounts and scientific models of consciousness. The basic problem, as they see it, is that an account of neurobiological processes from the third-person perspective seems to be fundamentally irreconcilable with a phenomenological account from the first-person point of view. This project is driven by the view that, as Roy et al. propose, phenomenology has to be ‘integrated into an explanatory framework where every acceptable property is made continuous with the properties admitted by natural science’\textsuperscript{50}. These theorists hold, either explicitly or implicitly, that achieving this integration is the way to overcome the untenable ontological dualism that persistently haunts the philosophy of mind and is reproduced in the cognitive sciences.


Let us illustrate this with a few examples of the kind of moves that are being made. The first example is to be found in recent work by Hubert Dreyfus. Although Dreyfus’s suggestions in this direction are tentative, and his general attitude to scientistic naturalism is sceptical, he nevertheless affirms a potential continuity between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and cognitive science. The structure of the argument is typical. Asserting that ‘cognitive scientists have much to learn from Merleau-Ponty’\textsuperscript{51}, Dreyfus incorporates Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in his critique of representationalism in cognitive science. Dreyfus strongly attacks the view that ‘intelligence consists in the acquisition and manipulation of internal symbols that stand for [or ‘represent’] salient features of the environment’\textsuperscript{52}.

In explaining the flaws in this view, and in his proposal of an alternative, Dreyfus suggests that we might equate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an ‘intentional arc’ with the notion of a ‘feedback loop’ in cognitive science. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty claims that:

\textit{… the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and...}


---
moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects\textsuperscript{53}.

Dreyfus takes this concept to represent a certain kind of dialectical relationship between the active subject and its milieu. He explains that:

\[ \ldots \text{the notion of a dialectic of milieu and action is meant to capture the idea that, in learning, past experience is projected back into the perceptual world of the learner and shows up as affordances or solicitations to further action. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, a ‘person’s projects polarize the world, bringing magically to view a host of signs which guide action} \ldots \text{.} \]

Dreyfus articulates the intentional arc in the process of skill acquisition as a ‘feedback loop between the learner and the perceptual world’\textsuperscript{55}. Understanding Merleau-Ponty's notion of the ‘intentional arc’ in this way then allows him to argue for a convergence between it and the non-representationalist theory of neural networks. This theory, also known as ‘connectionism’, utilises simulated systems of neurons called ‘neural networks’. The artificial neurons or ‘nodes’ are programming constructs that mimic the properties of biological neurons. Whereas ‘GOFAI’ (good old-fashioned AI) employs the sequential processing of information according to specified rules, neural net or ‘connectionist’ approaches take the brain as their model.

\textsuperscript{55} Dreyfus, ‘Merleau-Ponty and Recent Cognitive Science’, p.132.
This attempt to simulate the brain means that the processing of information within a neural network is distributed throughout the entire network. As such, neural networks are said to be capable of ‘learning’. And they do so in such a way that in dealing with a new ‘situation’ they do not have to rely on a stored memory or a rule in order to cope. Thus, they are said to simulate what Merleau-Ponty describes as our basic non-representational bodily coping in everyday human performance. The logic of the argument is that neural-network theory and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of our basic bodily coping with the world can be claimed to stand in a relationship of mutual support in demonstrating the implausibility of representationalism.

Dreyfus argues that ‘the representationalist accounts of our most basic and pervasive forms of learning and skillful action are mistaken’ and ‘require a different account’. This claim, he says, can be defended ‘not only on phenomenological grounds, but on neuroscientific grounds as well’. Merleau-Ponty holds the view that ‘consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’, an intentional bodily relation to the world whereby the world is revealed to us by and through our bodily capacity to interact with it. Dreyfus suggests that ‘Merleau-Ponty's account of the “I can” must be “supplemented” with a scientific theory of how the body – conceived objectivistically as an “actual body-structure” – conditions competence and cognition’. To say this, however, is to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical claims are straightforwardly subject to empirical correction. A claim that ought to strike us as suspect given that Merleau-Ponty asserts that

56 Ibid. p.142.
57 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.159.
‘perception is not an event of nature’\textsuperscript{59}, ‘the descriptive method can acquire a genuine claim only from the transcendental point of view’\textsuperscript{60}, and that the ‘transcendental attitude is already implied in the descriptions of the psychologist’\textsuperscript{61}.

A second motivating example can be seen in the work of Sean Gallagher. Gallagher makes the same kind of move as Dreyfus when he interprets Merleau-Ponty as addressing the issue of ‘bodily systems that operate on a subpersonal, automatic level’, and goes on to argue that the role of the body schema is ‘impenetrable to phenomenological reflection’ and must be ‘worked out conceptually with the help of the empirical sciences’\textsuperscript{62}. Suggesting that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical claims are straightforwardly subject to empirical correction, he claims that empirical research can produce evidence that, in supporting Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of lived experience, also demonstrates a convergence between the two bodies of theory.

A third motivating example is provided in the work of Francisco Varela, Evan Thomson and Eleanor Rosch. In their work, \textit{The Embodied Mind}, the authors argue for what they call an ‘enactive approach’ to cognition. Like Dreyfus they argue against representationalism and for the view of perception as a process essentially bound up with action. Alva Noë captures the main thrust of this ‘enactivist’ view of perception in the following passage from his book \textit{Action in Perception}:

\textsuperscript{59} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, p.145.
\textsuperscript{60} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.8.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. p.69.
\textsuperscript{62} Gallagher, ‘Body Schema and Intentionality’, p.233. For Merleau-Ponty the body functions as ‘the subject of perception’ by means of what he calls the ‘body schema’. The body schema is that which provides an \textit{a priori} structure to human experience of the world. It manifests as a set of basic bodily capacities that are geared into an experiential world which calls on those capacities in a kind of ‘dialogue’ between body and world.
Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skillful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction … [A]ll perception is touchlike in this way: Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of bodily skills. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do … we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out\(^63\).

This is an approach which seeks to ‘open a space of possibilities in which the circulation between cognitive science and human experience can be fully appreciated …’\(^64\) However, as in the claims of Dreyfus and Gallagher, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is being invoked in the name of a scientific project that is at odds with the main thrust of his philosophical convictions. Those who are enlisting Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analyses in this way are assuming that his philosophy does not need to undergo a process of ‘naturalisation’ before being applicable in the field of the cognitive sciences\(^65\). This, however, is an unjustified assumption because Merleau-Ponty holds that there is a fundamental difference

\(^{64}\) Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p.xviii.
\(^{65}\) I am using the term ‘naturalisation’ here in the sense it is used in the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate that I introduced earlier (i.e. the attempt to bridge the ‘explanatory gap’ that exists between phenomenological accounts and scientific models of consciousness within the framework of the cognitive sciences). I will argue later that this use of the term involves the reduction of the term ‘naturalism’ to that of ‘scientism’. Thus, I will be using ‘scare quotes’ for the remainder of this chapter in order to indicate that the usage is theirs, and not one that I endorse.
between philosophical and scientific enquiry. At base, Merleau-Ponty takes his philosophy to be ‘critical’ and ‘radical’ in the Kantian sense, as involving a transcendental reflection that seeks to understand the very possibility of the sciences, not simply to contribute to their stock of knowledge. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty talks about the taking up of a ‘transcendental attitude’, which for him means that we refuse to simply take the subject matter ‘nature’ for granted. Instead he holds that a philosophical phenomenology must take up a transcendental perspective with respect to empirical experience and the scientific objective world that it purports to discover ‘out there’ wholly independent of human enquirers. Taking up this ‘critical’, ‘radical’ or ‘transcendental’ perspective enables us to ask genuinely philosophical questions about the foundations of experience and of scientific theorising. By asking questions about the conditions of possibility for the perceptual field of our everyday experience, says Merleau-Ponty, we uncover the very basis of this experience and of scientific knowledge – what makes them possible. As a result of this we understand their ontological significance anew.

That Varela, Thomson and Rosch are not clear about this transcendental dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be seen, for example, when they assert:
For Merleau-Ponty, as for us, *embodiment* has this double sense: it encompasses both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms\(^{66}\).

This is a conception of Merleau-Ponty’s view that fails to grasp why he criticised Adhemar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein – neuroscientists of his day – for not seeing that the lived body is the ‘third term *between* the psychic and the physiological’\(^{67}\). Varela, Thomson and Rosch are reading Merleau-Ponty for inspiration and guidance in their project of arguing for the importance of embodiment *for cognitive science*. Their ‘double sense’ conception of embodiment, although inspired by Merleau-Ponty, is different from Merleau-Ponty’s view, which holds that the ‘lived body’ is an *ontological* category that is intended to explicate not just phenomenological experience but a *kind of being*.

These misconstruals of his key claims indicate a type of problem in the literature that can only be sorted out via an attentive exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s view. Such an exposition aims to show that, when properly explicated, his philosophy indicates that the project we now call cognitive science is fundamentally incapable of theorising consciousness. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, Merleau-Ponty holds that the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ project is fundamentally misguided due to its tacit acceptance of Cartesian assumptions about the nature of the world. And, therefore, despite its attempts to incorporate versions of his insights into a science of consciousness, it necessarily loses the core features of

\(^{66}\) Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p.xvi.

\(^{67}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.140, n.55.
the phenomenon of consciousness as it attempts to accommodate them within an objectivistic scientific account.

These recent and tacit ‘naturalisations’ of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology lack a substantial discussion addressing the kinds of problems an importation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology into the cognitive sciences might raise. For example, there is no attempt to justify it in the face of Merleau-Ponty’s argument that ‘perception is not an event nature’ and that, therefore, we must ‘take up a transcendental attitude’, or that his philosophy is ‘beyond realism and idealism’. This lack of critical reflection and the occlusion of Merleau-Ponty as philosopher in relation to the ‘naturalisation’ of phenomenology debate provide us with a powerful motivation to put Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology back into the context of his philosophy proper. This will help us to see why Merleau-Ponty would view the use to which he has recently been put as missing the true significance of his work.

In the interest of making explicit the nature of his contribution to contemporary debates in the area of epistemology and ontology, and thus the nature of his deep philosophical challenge to scientistic forms of naturalism, it is a main goal of the thesis to present a reading of Merleau-Ponty’s position that seeks to explicate his philosophy on its own terms. That is, as an existential phenomenology that draws its inspiration from Heidegger’s conception of ‘fundamental ontology’ and the ‘existential analytic of Dasein’ in Being and Time. The successful achievement of this goal will involve a close reading of Merleau-Ponty and an explication of the way in which he uses a methodological phenomenology in the context of an existential ontology. Our purpose here is to illustrate how, in fact,
Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position is intended to refuse the possibility of ‘naturalisation’ – if naturalisation means the explicit or implicit advocacy of a scientific realist ontology, which he holds as being premised on a philosophical mistake.

Now it might be said that many of the theorists working in the area of cognitive science are not attempting to advance philosophical positions but are rather in the business of formulating explanatory theories within the sciences themselves. This is true in most cases and it is also the case that even the more philosophical thinkers, such as Dreyfus and Gallagher, are, when discussing these issues, doing so in a way that is not intended to be drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s epistemological and ontological claims but rather just his phenomenological claims. Now this is defensible up to a point, but there is a sense in Gallagher and Dreyfus that they are deliberately engaged in exploring new theories that might bridge the ‘explanatory gap’. This implies that there may arise new conceptual frameworks that might integrate the presently sharply divided phenomenological and neurobiological levels.

The recent projects in the cognitive sciences are self-consciously interdisciplinary and incline to the view that they are converging towards the creation of a new kind of integrated scientific approach – an ‘intrinsically human science’ as Ron McClamrock has referred to it. However, despite this, Varela’s claim that ‘disciplined first-person’ accounts should be an integral element of the validation of a

---

neurobiological proposal, and not merely coincidental or heuristic information\(^6^9\) implies that, although there are new and more subtle theories on the horizon, these theories are not fundamentally different in kind from those out of which they grow. Their principal difference is precisely their interdisciplinarity. But interdisciplinary science is still science and the participation in a ‘scientific enterprise’, as Gallagher has put it, is emphatically not what Merleau-Ponty takes himself to be doing. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phenomenology of Perception* that any current or future theory that the post-cognitivists or others might advocate rests necessarily on an implicit commitment to scientific realism – an ontological commitment.

### 3.2 Problems in Recent Anglophone Merleau-Ponty Scholarship and the Need for a Corrective ‘Counter-Reading’

If I motivate the thesis, as I have done, with the example of the misreading of Merleau-Ponty for cognitive science, and if, finding the criticism of those readings persuasive, a philosopher or cognitive scientist sympathetic to a scientistic version of naturalism wants to understand the full philosophical import of Merleau-Ponty’s views, then I am obliged to provide a careful and patient reading of his work in order to explain this. However, Merleau-Ponty’s work is notoriously complex and requires of its reader not only a solid grasp of the discipline of psychology but also a grasp of the tradition of philosophy from Descartes through Kant to Husserl and Heidegger. Given the daunting nature of this task, it might then seem advisable to read

secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty in order to help one to come to terms with his subtle views.

However, a danger lurks for the unwary in some of the recent literature, as there is a tendency amongst Anglophone philosophers who discuss Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as an explicitly philosophical position to misunderstand his views. And this brings us to our second critical target. This target is recent readings in the Anglophone scholarship that misunderstand key aspects of his position. Three aspects I have identified that are in need of a corrective reading are his account of the phenomenological reduction, the nature of his transcendentalism and his conception of dialectics. Let us introduce the problems that will be addressed.

3.2.1 Problem 1: Phenomenological Reduction

In recent Anglophone literature there has been a variety of interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the phenomenological reduction, making the secondary literature on the subject at times confusing. In order to dispel this confusion I will subject some of these readings to criticism. Explaining why they go wrong will help to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s conception. The alternate reading that I present both avoids these errors and is, I shall argue, more consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Taylor Carman and Stephen Priest, for example, argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of human existence as ‘being-in-the-world’ necessitates a rejection of the *epoché* as a core part of his method. However, as I will argue, this view is mistaken
and a close reading indicates that Merleau-Ponty does not reject the *epoché* or phenomenological reduction; rather, he reconceives them and advances his own modified version intended to overcome the problems he see as inherent in Husserl’s version.

Likewise, Joel Smith and Stephen Priest interpret the *epoché* as consisting of a ‘second-order act of parenthesising, or neutralising’, performed on ‘the general thesis of the natural attitude’, which is a ‘first-order judgement’\(^70\). Against this view I argue that Merleau-Ponty does not hold that the natural attitude rests only on the positing of a propositional ‘general thesis’ that might be ‘neutralised’ in this fashion. Rather, his view is that although the ‘putting in abeyance’ of ‘the assertions arising out of the natural attitude’ is a necessary condition for overturning the natural attitude, it is not a sufficient one. This is because this approach alone does not identify the unique status of our natural attitude as a ‘kind of “faith”’ – a kind of primitive perceptual understanding that is so fundamental that it is the condition of the possibility for us either holding, denying or bracketing any of our propositional beliefs.

3.2.2 *Problem 2: Transcendentalism*

A mistake that some philosophers make is that they tend to be misled by the fact that Merleau-Ponty uses a transcendental methodology and also denies realism, claims that prompt their misreading of his work as form of idealism. This misreading

\(^{70}\) Smith, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction’, p.559.
allows them to misrepresent the nature of his phenomenological ontology and thus to misrepresent the nature of its challenge to scientistic naturalism. For example, some scientistic naturalists have hastily characterised his position as a ‘traditional’ idealism. This view can be seen, for example, in John Searle’s recent suggestion that Merleau-Ponty ‘is an idealist in a rather traditional sense’.

Unlike Searle, others give Merleau-Ponty an attentive reading and claim that his position must be understood through its relationship to Kant’s and that it is, as Sebastian Gardner puts it, ‘a new kind of transcendental idealism’. In this vein Thomas Baldwin claims that Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental approach to philosophy ‘is not that of a “pure” subject of consciousness’ but is instead ‘an idealism which gives a special status to the body as that for which there is a perceived world’.

One of the main difficulties that these interpreters of Merleau-Ponty have is in understanding the role that a transcendental methodology plays in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty describes his method as being at base phenomenological but also importantly involving the ‘taking up a transcendental attitude’. His lack of a detailed discussion in *Phenomenology of Perception* of what this transcendental dimension involves can certainly serve to foster confusion. It is just such confusion that arises in the interpretation of his position by the aforementioned readers of Merleau-Ponty. In order to dispel the

---


confusion contained within these readings of Merleau-Ponty it will be a key goal of my ‘counter-reading’ to explore and clarify the nature of his transcendentalism and to argue why it is that these readers misinterpret his position. Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism does not imply idealism. I will argue instead that they misread him because they bring him too close to Kant, overlooking the significance of the existential dimension of his thought.

In order to properly grasp his existential phenomenology as a fully ontological position we need to understand how his position both powerfully critiques the tradition of transcendental idealism and nevertheless incorporates a transcendental methodology. It is only through an account of his break with this tradition that the full significance of his position can come into view and hence the full scope of its challenge to scientistic naturalism be made apparent.

3.2.3 Problem 3: Dialectics

Another crucial dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s position that is either misunderstood or incompletely understood is his incorporation of the Hegelian concept of dialectics. The fact that Merleau-Ponty has a dialectical approach is discussed in recent Anglophone literature. However, it is never explicitly clarified how his regular and varying usages of the term hang together, and this dimension of
his thought is often discussed briefly, with some authors even explicating his position without mentioning it\textsuperscript{74}.

Merleau-Ponty himself does not provide an explicit discussion of his appropriation and use of the concept of dialectics. Given this, a reconstruction of the rationale of that appropriation will help to make clear both what that conception amounts to and why recent scholars in the Anglophone tradition have failed to grasp the full significance of his conception of an ‘existential dialectics’.

Taking Merleau-Ponty’s references to Hegel and dialectics in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} seriously is fraught with interpretative difficulties. For, like Merleau-Ponty’s other appropriated terms (e.g. ‘phenomenological reduction’, ‘transcendental’), the term ‘dialectics’ is substantially reconfigured in the process of its importation into an ‘existential dialectics’. This conception is all too easily misunderstood if the language of dialectics that he uses is interpreted through the lens of its traditional meaning in Hegelian phenomenology and not properly situated in the framework of his existential ontology.

Many recent readers of Merleau-Ponty struggle to articulate his complex conception. Taylor Carman, for example, points out the way in which Merleau-Ponty uses a distinctive general strategy of argument: ‘a deliberately nonadversarial dialectical strategy’\textsuperscript{75}. However, he does not tell us whether or not this general strategy of argument applies uniformly across the board in all areas of Merleau-

\textsuperscript{74} See, for example: Hammond, Howarth and Keat, \textit{Understanding Phenomenology}; Romdenh-Romluc, \textit{Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception}; Macann, \textit{Four phenomenological philosophers}; Cebone, \textit{Understanding Phenomenology}.

\textsuperscript{75} Carman, \textit{Merleau-Ponty}, p.27.
Ponty’s theory, implying, by not qualifying, that it does. Carman also discusses Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a dialectic operating at the level of culture and history without saying whether or how his general dialectical strategy of argument links up with his claims about the dialectical structure of historical experience. Nor does he mention the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s usage and Hegel’s usage.

As mentioned, the basic issue is that the authors I discuss tend talk about the use of dialectics in different aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s theory without explaining how they hang together. For example, they talk about a dialectical relation between body and world that expresses the way in which humans and the world are intricately ‘intertwined’. Or, as we saw with Dreyfus earlier, they talk about the ‘feedback structure’ by which ‘past experience is projected back into the perceptual world of the learner and shows up as affordances or solicitations to further action’ in terms of a ‘dialectic of milieu and action’ – a dialectic operating at the level of perceptual subject and environment that structures the perceived world. But these authors do not specify what Merleau-Ponty means by dialectic in any detail or, again, its relation with Hegel’s usage.

When we do see authors attempting to grasp Merleau-Ponty’s notion of dialectics in more detail they fail to capture the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s view. For example, Stephen Priest undertakes several interesting discussions around Merleau-Ponty’s use of Hegelian themes without managing to present a coherent

---

statement as to how Merleau-Ponty understands his use of dialectics to be reconciled with his existential ontology. When explicating certain key Merleau-Pontian ideas, Priest even offers his reader a dual reading: a ‘quasi Heideggerean’ interpretation and a ‘quasi Hegelian’ interpretation. John Russon, on the other hand, takes a different tack, asserting that ‘the Phenomenology of Perception can … with equal legitimacy, be called a book of Hegelian or Husserlian (or, for that matter, Heideggerean) phenomenology’. This claim suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s use of dialectics is essentially in accord with Hegel’s, which, as I will demonstrate, is not the case. Given these less than cohering views, it might be reasonable to be sceptical as to whether a coherent picture of Merleau-Ponty’s account is possible. As such, I intend to give an account of Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the term in order to sort out the type of view that he is arguing for.

By providing an explicit interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s account I will show how dialectics is crucial to his view, how he understands himself to have integrated the concept of dialectics within the context of an existential ontology, and why recent scholarship has failed to grasp how dialectics and existentialism come together in his conception of an ‘existential dialectic’. The view that we arrive at is that Merleau-Ponty’s position involves three interrelated dialectical structures. The first is a dialectical strategy of argument embodied in the methodological structure of his critique of Intellectualism and Empiricism in Phenomenology of Perception. This method structures his analyses in Phenomenology of Perception in terms of a

---

79 Priest, Merleau-Ponty, p.49.
81 I have chosen to follow the convention used by Sebastian Gardner in capitalising Merleau-Ponty’s technical terms Empiricism and Intellectualism in order to denote his distinct usage.
‘dialectic of objective thought’ that opens us up to a dialectical structure at the level of ontology. At this deeper level Merleau-Ponty uses existential-dialectical categories to express the most basic ontological structures: the ‘body-subject’ and ‘being-in-the-world’. Merleau-Ponty advocates the use of dialectics as the model of reason and meaning appropriate to the ontological level and, hence, it provides the ‘logical structure’ of these fundamental ontological categories. The third usage sits in between these two, expressing the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the individual and their cultural and historical context.

4. The Structure of the Thesis

The aim of the thesis is to demonstrate the full philosophical import of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology through an explication of his method and of the claims that he arrives at via this method. In terms of its argumentative trajectory, the thesis contains a three-step movement. The first step starts with a critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ question that is raised by the uses of Merleau-Ponty in ‘post-cognitivist’ cognitive science. The second addresses the question of the correct interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position and method, specifically critiquing recent claims regarding his phenomenological method, his transcendentalism and use of dialectics. And, finally, the third step moves to consider some problems attending Merleau-Ponty’s central thesis of ‘the primacy of perception’, suggesting a response to overcome these
difficulties that retains the core of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the lived body.

The linchpin that holds this three-step movement, and thus the thesis, together is the reading of Merleau-Ponty that is laid out chapters 1 and 2, but is further developed through the critical interpretation and analysis of chapters 3 and 4. This reading explicates the distinctive way in which Merleau-Ponty’s position is a phenomenological ontology that draws heavily on Heidegger’s ‘existential analytic of Dasein’. The reading is intended to function as a ‘counter-reading’ with respect to its two mains targets (scientistic appropriations of Merleau-Ponty and recent philosophical misreadings).

To summarise, the basic structure of the argument against our first target – scientistic appropriations of Merleau-Ponty – is that:

1. Rather than being convergent with ‘scientistic’ forms of naturalism, his position is in fact explicitly and deeply critical of the philosophical presuppositions of the general program of the cognitive sciences and scientistic philosophy of mind.

2. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy shows us that there is a way to realise a naturalistic turn other than the scientistic approach which underpins the recent inter-disciplinary program of the cognitive sciences, as well as cognitive science-inspired philosophy of mind (the attempt to bridge the ‘explanatory gap’ that exists between phenomenological accounts and scientific models of consciousness).
3. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position refuses the possibility of ‘naturalisation’, as conceived in the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate, because ‘naturalisation’ here involves the explicit or implicit advocacy of a scientific realist ontology, which he holds as being premised on a philosophical mistake.

4. It is Merleau-Ponty’s objective in *Phenomenology of Perception* to convince his reader of the conceptual confusion at the core of the scientistic project, and to argue in favour of a methodology that is both phenomenological and transcendental, and for an ontology that is ‘existential’, as the appropriate way to clear up this confusion.

The basic structure of the argument against my second target – recent philosophical misreadings of Merleau-Ponty in the Anglophone scholarship – is that:

1. These authors either misunderstand the method, the transcendental dimension or the dialectical aspect that underpins Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

2. On the issue of method, they misconstrue Merleau-Ponty’s conception of phenomenological reduction, reading him through either Husserl or Heidegger. Whereas, his unique method sees the reduction as involving a purgative operation that seeks to eliminate the objectivism of the natural attitude at its root in the structure of perception itself.

3. On the issue of transcendentalism, the authors misconstrue his use of a transcendental method as necessitating ‘a new kind of transcendental
idealism’. But his existential phenomenology is in fact a transcendental anti-realism, which rejects the Kantian epistemological problematic that gives rise to the traditional the realism-idealism debate.

4. On the issue of dialectics, the sense in which his philosophy is dialectical is either misconstrued or incompletely construed: misconstrued, as a result of reading him too closely to Hegel; or incompletely construed, as a result of focusing on one aspect of his use of dialectics without properly relating it to others. Both of these problems result from failing to fully appreciate the way in which the universal phenomenological constraint on Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical thinking makes it an ‘existential dialectic’ – *a dialectic within the bounds of ‘the principle of phenomenology’.*

5. This confusion is dispelled by realising that Merleau-Ponty has three dominant senses of dialectic. The first sense refers to the methodological structure of his critique of Intellectualism and Empiricism in *Phenomenology of Perception*, a dialectic of ‘objective thought’. The second, ontological, usage of the term dialectics refers to the model of reason and meaning appropriate to the ontological level, providing the ‘logical structure’ of his fundamental ontological categories (‘body-subject’ and ‘being-in-the-world’). The third usage expresses the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the individual and their cultural and historical context.
6. The misunderstandings of his method, transcendentalism and dialectics are due to the fact that these authors have not grasped the full originality of his existential position.

7. In order to fully grasp this originality we need to understand:

   a) the way that Merleau-Ponty reconceptualises the phenomenological reduction;

   b) how his position powerfully critiques the tradition of transcendental idealism yet incorporates a transcendental methodology; and

   c) the way in which Merleau-Ponty incorporates the Hegelian concept of dialectics within a Heidegger-inspired ontological framework.

To conclude this introductory chapter I will briefly describe the content of subsequent chapters. In chapters 1 and 2 I present an overview of the main theoretical innovations contained in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology. I begin Chapter 1 with an exploration of his conception of the descriptive method and how he contrasts it with scientific explanation and Kantian ‘reflective analysis’. I follow this with a discussion of his view of the phenomenological reduction. In this discussion I critique several recent interpretations before presenting an alternate reading that I argue is more consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s textual claims.

In Chapter 2 I continue to build my picture with a presentation of how Merleau-Ponty sees the taking of a phenomenological approach to philosophy as necessitating existentialism – the philosophy of concrete human existence. I do this
via an exploration of his account of intentionality and the way that it feeds into his concept of ‘existence’ and his exploration of the existential structure of reality.

Following this, I complete the first step of my argumentative trajectory, contending that Merleau-Ponty would hold that the scientistic use to which he has recently been put fails to grasp the philosophical significance of his phenomenological account.

As I have said, there has been some confusion regarding the transcendental aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Should he be read as a transcendental philosopher? And if so what kind? In the interest of clarifying this issue I explore the question of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism in Chapter 3. This chapter presents an account of his position as a methodological transcendentalism that is anti-realist but not transcendental idealist. Through an exploration of the implications of his damning critique of Intellectualist transcendental philosophy we see why the recent claims by Sebastian Gardner and Thomas Baldwin that he is ‘a new kind of transcendental idealist’ are mistaken.

In Chapter 4 I go on to deepen my analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s position via an exploration of his appropriation of the key concept of dialectics. The purpose of this chapter is to critique the claims of recent interpretations and to deepen our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s existentialism by focusing on the way that he critically incorporates the concept of dialectics within his existential ontology.

And finally, in Chapter 5 I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception faces a significant problem due to his conception of the language/perception relation. This is because he does not see the full significance of
the deep linguistic context that is the enabling and conditioning background through which phenomenological description necessarily takes place. Despite the fact that we can engage in a phenomenology of the pre-predicative level in a way that the results of our inquiry can contribute to our epistemological and ontological claims, the understanding that we achieve of the pre-personal level is not capable of serving as the epistemological foundation of the level of both the objective world of scientific discourse and the lifeworld of personal thought and action.

The central consequence of this, as Joseph Margolis has argued, is that Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the philosophical significance of the pre-predicative as ‘originary origin’\(^{82}\) is compromised. Attention to the constitutive role of language indicates the need for a revised conception of the ‘originary’. This revised conception retains the status of an ‘incompletely penetrable precondition’\(^{83}\). However, in encountering the pre-objective we are not thereby encountering the pre-predicative ‘anterior to all traditions’\(^{84}\) but rather encountering ‘a languaged world’\(^{85}\).

Furthermore, despite removing the objectivism that grows out of the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction does not and cannot remove the fact of our necessary situatedness in a received natural language tradition. And it is the primary status of this ordinary language form of discourse that Merleau-Ponty overlooks in his view of the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order. As such, I

\(^{83}\) Ibid.  
\(^{84}\) Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.208.  
argue that Merleau-Ponty’s concretised plurality of body-subjects, coupled with the argument regarding the deep hermeneutic-linguistic context of lived experience, undermines the notion of a singular lifeworld that he tacitly assumes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As Margolis observes, this view ought to be ‘replaced by plural, variable, historicized, open, potentially incommensurable lifeworlds’\(^{86}\).

This critique suggests grounds for adopting a revised version of Merleau-Ponty’s position. This revised position involves a full acknowledgement of his method as a hermeneutic phenomenology and a revision of his claims about the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order. And although this revised account retains his insights about the lived body, perception and the necessary situatedness of the subject, the problems with the thesis of the primacy of perception seem to necessitate the rejection of the idea of an account of the pre-predicative as capable of serving as epistemological ground. As I argue, it is hard to see how it is the pre-predicative world that is being characterised rather than the pre-predicative as pre-interpreted through a contextualising linguistic-cultural lifeworld. Therefore, it is hard to see how Merleau-Ponty can avoid this revision to the epistemological dimension of the primacy of perception thesis.

Chapter 1: Merleau-Ponty’s Existential Phenomenology: Theory and Method

1. Introduction

In this chapter I begin my exploration of Merleau-Ponty’s main theoretical innovations, which centre on his commitment to phenomenology as the fundamental method for philosophy. These theoretical innovations develop as a result of his attempt to address the issues of ontology inadequately handled in what he refers to in _Phenomenology of Perception_ as the ‘Intellectualist’ idealism of Husserl’s position in _Ideas I_. This development leads him to reformulate Husserl’s central concepts of phenomenological reduction and intentionality. His resolutely phenomenological approach, coupled with his attempt to provide an answer to the ‘question of being’, leads him to assert his two central philosophical theses: the thesis of the epistemological primacy of perception and its correlate, the thesis of the ontological primacy of phenomena.¹

Although Merleau-Ponty abandons the idea of philosophy as a ‘rigorous science’ as Husserl had conceived it, and critiques the ‘Intellectualist’ account of perception and the subject, he nevertheless understands himself to be following through the ‘phenomenological turn’ in transcendental philosophy initiated by Husserl. This chapter contains an outline of Merleau-Ponty’s general position,

¹ I owe this formulation to M. C. Dillon, _Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology_ (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
highlighting key theoretical innovations in his existentialist reconceptualisation of
transcendental phenomenology. In this chapter I first discuss the fundamental
contrast he draws between phenomenological description, scientific explanation and
Kantian ‘reflective analysis’. Secondly, I discuss his view of the phenomenological
reduction and the key consequences that he sees as following from the attempt to
operationalise this method. Lastly, as I mentioned in the Introduction, in recent
Anglophone literature there has been a variety of interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s
account of the reduction, making the secondary literature on the subject confusing. In
order to dispel this confusion it will be necessary to subject these readings to
criticism. Explaining why they go wrong will help to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s
conception. The alternate reading that I present both avoids these errors and is, I
argue, more consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation in *Phenomenology of
Perception*.

The purpose of the exegesis in this chapter is to present an attentive reading
of his philosophical position on its own terms, as well as to elucidate both its
proximity and distance with respect to Intellectualist transcendental philosophy
(Husserl and Kant) and to scientistic naturalism (what Merleau-Ponty discusses
under the label ‘Empiricism’). The central part of his method is the
phenomenological reduction and, as such, it is vital that we avoid the mistakes made
by recent Merleau-Ponty scholars and get his key methodological procedure right. A
clear picture of what Merleau-Ponty’s methodological and philosophical claims
amount to will place us in a strong position to critically situate Merleau-Ponty *vis-à-
vis* the broader transcendental tradition out of which his work grows. And the
progressive development of both my interpretation and argument over chapters 1 to 4 will serve to formulate a clearer picture of why Merleau-Ponty rejects scientistic naturalism, and of his liberal naturalist alternative.

2. Merleau-Ponty’s General Conception of Phenomenological Philosophy

2.1 Phenomenological Description, Scientific Explanation and Reflective Analysis

In Husserl’s original formulation phenomenological description consisted in attending to the ‘things’ themselves – the objects that we phenomenally experience – with the goal of making systems of ‘apodictic’ statements regarding the essential structure of those ‘things’ on the basis of our direct experiential acquaintance with them. These statements are descriptive because they intend to capture this experience, and its objects, just as they are ‘intuitively presented’ to the subject. The descriptive intent of these statements with reference to what is experienced is contrasted with statements about that experience which involve either deductive reasoning, the framing of hypotheses, the construction of interpretative frameworks

or the construction of theoretical models\textsuperscript{3}. Husserl situated his descriptive method in the context of his conception of philosophy as ‘a rigorous science’. In terms of descriptive phenomenology he sought to provide a ‘scientifically rigorous’ account of the phenomena. And hence his ‘phenomenology’ was a ‘science of the phenomena’\textsuperscript{4}. Husserl is using the term science (\textit{Wissenschaft}) here in the broad sense of ‘any rigorous body of knowledge which is open to conclusive confirmation’. Notably, strict science is to be contrasted with metaphysical speculation\textsuperscript{5}.

The conception that Husserl is advocating sees philosophy as the most fundamental of all the sciences. Philosophy, in his view, seeks ‘the general aim of grounding science absolutely’\textsuperscript{6}, and thus it is the science that grounds all sciences (including itself). Unlike the empirical sciences, which presuppose and use certain other sciences (for example logic and mathematics), philosophy as the foundational science cannot presuppose and use other sciences in this way. In Husserl’s view philosophy must be self-grounding. The evidential grounds that philosophy claims for itself must be, as he puts it, ‘absolutely ultimate’. That is, a ‘complete and ultimate grounding on the basis of absolute insights, insights behind which one cannot go back any further’\textsuperscript{7}. For example, in \textit{Ideas I} he asserts that:

\textsuperscript{4} Husserl \textit{Ideas I}, p.xvii.
\textsuperscript{5} Priest, \textit{Merleau-Ponty}, p.26.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid}, p.2.
Phenomenology, by virtue of its essence, must claim to be ‘first’ philosophy and to offer the means for carrying out every possible critique of reason; therefore it demands the most perfect freedom from presuppositions and, concerning itself, an absolute reflective insight. It is of its own essence to realize the most perfect clarity concerning its own essence and therefore also concerning the principles of its method.8

So philosophy is ‘the one all-inclusive science’, whose ‘systematic unity’ is to provide the philosophical foundation for all the other sciences. For ‘only within the systematic unity of philosophy can they develop into genuine sciences’9.

In Merleau-Ponty’s account, on the other hand, phenomenological description functions as the primary means to expose the misconceptions involved in the claims of systematic scientific philosophy of the kind Husserl advocates. He also uses the descriptive method to critique the philosophical implications of a scientific approach in the sense of an empirical and objective study of a ‘world of objects’ and their external causal relations. The claims of Husserlian philosophical science, as well as the implicit philosophical beliefs that the empirical sciences rest on, are undermined, he argues, by what we discover through a systematic description of the structure of our lived experience situated in the context in which we live it – what Husserl called the ‘lifeworld’ (Lebenswelt).

8 Husserl Ideas I, p.148.
Now, despite this emphasis on the description of the content and structure of lived conscious experience, Merleau-Ponty incorporates the descriptive methodology of phenomenology within a fully ontological theory. This phenomenological ontology he refers to as existential ontology\(^\text{10}\). However, in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* he is at pains to emphasise that phenomenology is essentially a descriptive enterprise. For example, the phenomenologist, he asserts:

\[
\ldots \text{tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide}^{11}.
\]

The methodological contrast he most emphasises is that between the descriptive method and scientific explanation, on the one hand, and the critical ‘reflective analysis’ of the Kantian tradition on the other. The term ‘reflective analysis’ is a translation of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘analyse reflexive’\(^\text{12}\). What Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he uses this term is immediately informed by a philosophical position that was dominant in France prior to the Second World War. This neo-Kantian approach, exemplified in the work of Leon Brunschvicg, Alain (the pseudonym of Émile-Auguste Chartier) and P. Lachièze-Rey, asserts the idealist view that:

---

\(^\text{10}\) This path of an ontological reinterpretation of the phenomenological method was already laid down by Husserl in *Ideas I* and, crucially for the direction that Merleau-Ponty takes, by Heidegger in *Being and Time*.


\(^\text{12}\) This is also translated as ‘analytical reflection’ in the English translation.
… we have to get altogether outside the world, to a transcendental subject, an ‘inner self’ or a ‘pure Ego’, in order to find something which can use the resources of reason and abstract intuition to make sense of experience and thereby give meaning to a world in which it ends up locating itself as a mere ‘empirical’ self\textsuperscript{13}.

The method by which the philosopher achieves insight regarding the existence and nature of the ‘transcendental subject’ that constitutes the world of empirical experience is called a ‘transcendental deduction’. It is so called because it operates via a process of deduction from our empirical experience back to the necessary structures that are said to constitute this experience. As we do not experience these structures – or the ‘pure ego’ that is the putative source of these structures – they are not empirical, they are transcendental. Hence we need a transcendental deduction in order to lay them bare.

The descriptive method, by contrast, concentrates its efforts on ‘re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status\textsuperscript{14}. This procedure is primarily ‘a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing\textsuperscript{15}, though to give a descriptive account it may be necessary to engage in reflection in order to help access experiential contents or structures that are not immediately transparent. Nonetheless, this kind of reflection in the service of description does not affect the contrast between phenomenological description,

\textsuperscript{13} Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p.12.
\textsuperscript{14} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.vii.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p.ix.
‘reflective analysis’ (transcendental deduction) and ‘scientific explanation’ because what it helps us to ‘see’ is – if phenomenologically genuine – describable in its own right.

With respect to scientific explanation in the natural and human sciences Merleau-Ponty argues that:

Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself round me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematisation is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.

Thus, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, the phenomenological approach consists ‘from the start’ in ‘a foreswearing of science’.

When a philosopher takes up a fully phenomenological perspective he must describe the structure of his experience in a way that does not apply, or in any way

16 Ibid. pp.ix-x.
17 Ibid. p.ix.
rely on, theoretical explanations drawn from the natural or human sciences. With respect to the human sciences, says Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenological approach reveals that:

I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation\(^\text{18}\).

What a descriptive approach reveals is that human experience cannot be given an adequate account on the model of objects, as ‘another bit of the world’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it. To discuss human experience as ‘the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies’ cannot qualify as a legitimate descriptive account of what that experience is actually like. This is because, in a Humean vein, we do not literally experience this causality but nor can we understand ourselves, either phenomenologically or existentially, in terms of causality. Thus it is an explanatory construct that we impose onto our experience, not a description of that experience as it is – as it is intuitively given to us. It is this kind of theoretical imposition on to the more basic level of lived experience that is constitutive of empirical scientific theorising. Thus, from his phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty holds that any attempt to understand consciousness, or the human level of meaningful intentional experience, on the model of physical objects standing in causal relations

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid. p.ix.
Chapter 1: Merleau-Ponty’s Existential Phenomenology

is doomed to failure. This is because such ‘causal’ and ‘objective’ thinking must mischaracterise our experience in order to fit it into its framework.

A phenomenological approach must go underneath these types of theoretical constructs by practicing a methodological rejection of them. Importantly for Merleau-Ponty, given existentialism’s focus on human existence, this means that if we are to explore the question of human existence through a descriptive phenomenology the conception of human existence that arises out of both the human and natural sciences must not be allowed to intrude in any way. He is at pains to emphasise his distance from these views by stressing that there is a transcendental dimension to his phenomenological enquiry, and to his notion of human existence, that these scientistic approaches completely lack. Thus, he asserts that from a phenomenological perspective:

I am, not a ‘living creature’ nor even a ‘man’, nor again even ‘a consciousness’ endowed with all the characteristics which zoology, social anatomy or inductive psychology recognize in these various products of the natural or historical process – I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them …19

19 Ibid. p.ix.
These statements about the relation between any kind of scientific claims and the procedure of phenomenological description, and how this procedure necessitates a different concept of existence, are intended to draw our attention to the primordial character of the phenomenological level of description. In the assertion of any scientific claim, he argues, we ‘take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the … point of view … of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself round me and begins to exist for me’. In doing this we fail to see how ‘the whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced’.

Scientific approaches to philosophy consist in theoretical abstractions that have their basis in our primary lived experience. Any conception of the scientific ‘universe’ is derivative from the phenomenological ‘perceived world’ and, therefore, the validity of all scientific claims must ultimately rest on an account of the experience from which they are abstracted. As such, the only way to arrive at an accurate assessment of the ‘meaning and scope’ of the sciences, Merleau-Ponty argues, is by ‘reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression’. And it is the job of the phenomenological method to facilitate this ‘reawakening’. The overall goal is to give this reawakened basic level of experience a ‘philosophical status’.

As well as being intended to ‘exclude … scientific explanation’, says Merleau-Ponty, this methodological ‘demand for pure description’ is ‘equally’


intended to exclude the procedures of ‘reflective analysis’ – the transcendental deductions employed in Kantian transcendental idealism. So, despite its focus on consciousness, he argues that his philosophy is ‘absolutely distinct from the idealist return to consciousness’. For in his view the moves of idealists, like Kant and the Husserl of *Ideas I*, involve an exaggerated prioritisation of consciousness that eliminates the ‘bilateral’ relationship between consciousness and world. And the reason for this is that it unjustifiably overemphasises the constitutive role of the subject with respect to the world of our lived experience.

Merleau-Ponty argues that Kant clearly represents an improvement over empirical scientific thinking because he recognises the foundational and irreducible role of the subject of experience. Nevertheless, in line with the phenomenological dimension of his work, he argues that Kantian ‘reflective analysis’ is inadequate because it:

… starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that experience, revealing the all-embracing synthesis as that without which there would be no world. To this

---


24 Merleau-Ponty’s association of Husserl with the position he characterises as Intellectualism concerns what he sees as a strong Intellectualist strain running through Husserl’s thought. He does not, however, claim that Husserl fits all the criteria for Intellectualism. Rather, Husserl’s Intellectualist presuppositions are in conflict with the results yielded through his phenomenological method – the phenomenology of the lived body and of perception. Merleau-Ponty’s view is that ‘to all appearances’ the ‘programme of a transcendental phenomenology’ is in line with ‘the ordinary perspective of a transcendental philosophy’. However, ‘Husserl’s originality lies beyond the notion of intentionality’ and ‘is to be found in the elaboration of this notion and in the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representations, of a deeper intentionality …’ Thus Husserl’s thought has strong Intellectualist elements but is pulled in the direction of existentialism by the implications of this ‘deeper intentionality’.
extent it ceases to remain part of our experience and offers, in place of an account, a reconstruction\textsuperscript{25}.

A phenomenological approach, on the other hand, criticises Kant’s reconstruction of experience and the ‘faculty psychology’ that instantiates it. The phenomenological approach urges in place of Kant’s analysis of the object of experience – ‘which bases the world on the synthesizing activity of the subject’ – Husserl’s conception of the object as it is experienced. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, a ‘noematic reflection’ which remains within the object and, instead of begetting it, brings to light its fundamental unity\textsuperscript{26}.

Here Merleau-Ponty is using the Husserlian terminology of the ‘noesis’ and the ‘noema’. In Ideas I Husserl characterises the act of consciousness (e.g. perceiving) as the ‘noesis’, or the ‘noetic’ component of the intentional phenomenon, while he refers to the intentional object (e.g. the object as perceived) as the ‘noema’, or the ‘noematic’ component of the intentional phenomenon. This is not a terminology Merleau-Ponty adopts in general. He simply uses it to draw a contrast between a Kantian reconstruction of experience and the phenomenologist’s descriptive account. What he emphasises is the way that the phenomenologist ‘remains within the object’ (i.e. ‘the perceived’ as perceived), bringing to light its ‘fundamental unity’ as an actual, phenomenologically encountered ‘object’. Whatever unity the object can be said to contain is revealed through the way that we

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. p.x.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. p.x.
progressively encounter the object in our interaction with it. For example, our conscious experience of a table involves a flow of successive perceptual ‘profiles’ that are progressively synthesised and unified in such a way that we grasp the multiplicity of successive profiles as presenting a numerically identical object. Thus the concept of unity involved is that of a synthetic ‘phenomenal unity’ because it does not exceed that unity which is revealed through the procedure of phenomenological investigation.

In recapturing the fundamental unity of the object the emphasis on *noematic* description, argues Merleau-Ponty, serves to block the Kantian move to unjustifiably over-emphasise the constitutive role of the subject at the expense of objects and the world. For what the emphasis on noematic description helps us to see is that the world is fundamentally not, and could not possibly be, the construct of the ego’s cognitive ‘constituting power’. Rather, the world is ‘always already there before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence’\(^27\). As such:

\[\ldots\] it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality\(^28\).

\(^{27}\) *Ibid.* p.xii.
Kantian philosophy of this kind for Merleau-Ponty involves a ‘reflective analysis’ that ‘loses sight of its own beginning’. As such it proceeds through an overly abstracted reflection that is ‘carried off by itself’ and that ‘installs itself in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time’\(^{29}\). Merleau-Ponty argues that what it fails to see is the crucial way in which, ‘when I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience’\(^{30}\). What this means is that our very capacity to abstractedly reflect in the fashion of Kantian philosophy rests upon our more primary capacities of perception and action – capacities we have in virtue of being *essentially embodied subjects*. These capacities are manifested in our basic ‘bodily’ intentionality. For Merleau-Ponty we are not simply objects with the property of consciousness, as a scientific approach would suggest, but rather are what he calls a ‘lived body’. This is a phenomenological concept of ‘the body as we live it’. As a ‘lived body’ we are neither pure subject nor pure object but rather experience a richly meaningful intentional ‘world’, resting on our basic bodily level awareness of, and responsiveness to, our environmental context. This basic intentionality consists of unreflected-upon but nevertheless meaningful relationships that manifest themselves through the ‘phenomenal field’ that takes shape as the context of our active exploration of the world. The phenomenal field is Merleau-Ponty’s term for the meaningful field of experience that is constituted and reconstituted for us in a progressive and ongoing way as a result of our *bodily* interactions with the world. In critiquing the way in which both empirical scientific

and Intellectualist approaches misdescribe and misunderstand the body and the perceived world, argues Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology ‘open[s] up a phenomenal field … and suggest[s] the rediscovery of a direct experience which must be … assigned its place in relation to scientific knowledge … and philosophical reflection’\textsuperscript{31}. The Empiricist approach misunderstands perception because it tries to theorise it around the concept of ‘sensation’ as the basic unit of experience. But, as Merleau-Ponty points out, this must fail because it is without phenomenological warrant. The most basic structure of perceptual experience is a figure/ground \textit{gestalt}:

‘The perceptual “something” is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a “field”’\textsuperscript{32}. The ‘sensation’, by contrast, is an atomistic abstraction from this basic configuration. The Intellectualist approach, on the other hand, misunderstands perception because it attempts to model perception on judgement, where to perceive an object is to synthesise a set of sensations under a category. With Kant, it holds the view that ‘intuitions without concepts are blind’\textsuperscript{33}. However, this model makes it is impossible to see how there could ever be a perceptual error of the kind that we actually encounter in our lived perceptual experience. This is because by building thought (judgement) into the very constitution of the perceptual object as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.} p.62. \\
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.} p.4. \\
\end{flushright}
an object Intellectualists in effect collapse the distinction between our perception and
our beliefs about our perception34. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

… if we see what we judge, how can we distinguish between true and
false perception? How will it then be possible to say that the sufferer
from hallucinations or the madman ‘think they see what they do not
see’? Where will be the difference between ‘seeing’ and ‘thinking one
sees’?35

Fundamentally then, both Empiricism and Intellectualism are misleading because
they try to conceptually ‘construct the shape of the world … perception [and] the
mind, instead of recognizing as the immanent source and as the final authority of our
knowledge of such things, the experience we have of them’36.

For Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the world as being correlative with the acts of
consciousness – the idea of intentionality – is now interpreted to mean that the world
neither determines consciousness (Empiricism), nor is it simply constructed by the
transcendental ego in the sense of giving form to the matter of experience
(Intellectualism). He argues that the world has ‘priority over’ the operations of a
reflecting ‘I’ but nevertheless that ‘the world … is given to the subject because the
subject is given to himself’37. The subject is ‘given to himself’ not as an absolute

34 For a particularly clear reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Empiricism and
Intellectualism see: Carman, Merleau-Ponty, pp.34-61.
35 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.40.
36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted in Carman, Merleau-Ponty, p.53 (Carman trans.).
37 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.xi.
reflecting ego but as a ‘relative and prepersonal’\textsuperscript{38} bodily subject who, by virtue of his concrete embodiment, is ‘a subject destined to the world’\textsuperscript{39}. Merleau-Ponty observes: I am a bodily subject who is ‘from the start outside myself and open to [a] world’\textsuperscript{40} that is ‘always already there’ before ‘any possible analysis of mine’\textsuperscript{41}.

We are open to the world through our basic pre-reflective perceptual experience – our bodily intentionality – which is our fundamental access to the real. Given this, Merleau-Ponty asserts that ‘the real has to be described, not constructed or formed’\textsuperscript{42}. Only those ‘forms’ (‘structures’) that are discernible phenomenologically are to count. It follows from this approach, Merleau-Ponty argues, that the Intellectualists are mistaken to ‘put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications’\textsuperscript{43}. The Intellectualists claim that the fact that we see objects as unified things, and not simply mere clusters of qualities, is a result of the application of the concept of substance to the ‘manifold’ of sensation provided passively by the senses. Kant, for example, says that:

\begin{quote}
… all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories, and since experience is cognition through
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. p.322. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. p.xii. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. p.530. \\
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. p.x. \\
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. p.xi. \\
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience\textsuperscript{44}.

But Merleau-Ponty counters this with his phenomenology of the structure of our actual lived perceptual experience. And this exploration indicates, as he puts it, that ‘perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them’\textsuperscript{45}.

3. The Phenomenological Reduction and its Consequences

Although Husserl is a constant reference point in the explication of his phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty does not work out his method via a close and detailed critical analysis of Husserl’s ideas. As Herbert Spiegelberg has observed regarding Merleau-Ponty’s account of the phenomenological method:

… there is no clear reference to Husserl’s reductions nor any attempt to parallel any of Husserl’s specific descriptions. Merleau-Ponty’s technique seems to have been developed without special consideration of Husserl’s methods, simply in an attempt to do justice to the phenomena at hand\textsuperscript{46}.

\textsuperscript{44} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B161.
\textsuperscript{45} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xi.
For Merleau-Ponty, ‘phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method’\(^47\). And it is the phenomenological reduction which he holds is the *central methodological insight of phenomenology*. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the concept of intentionality has often been mistakenly cited as the main discovery of phenomenology, but intentionality ‘is understandable *only through the reduction*’\(^48\). His point here is that the reduction is the procedure that facilitates our description of our intentional experience just as it is, and thus we can only truly grasp the nature of intentionality with the aid of the reduction.

Husserl’s version of the reduction consists in a methodological demand for a ‘change of attitude’, a change from what he calls the ‘natural attitude’ to that of the ‘transcendental-phenomenological attitude’. This shift in attitude is intended to take us from the perspective of viewing the world as we normally do as a mind-independent ‘real world’, to viewing this self-same world in terms of a constitutive achievement of subjectivity. This methodological strategy involves what he calls an ‘epoché’. To perform the *epoché* is to ‘bracket’ the ‘general thesis of the natural attitude’\(^49\), our everyday taken-for-granted attitude whereby we implicitly and uncritically ‘posit’ the existence of a subject-independent world of spatio-temporal objects\(^50\). The phenomenological reduction is called a ‘reduction’ because we are said to be ‘reducing’ our awareness, focusing it on the ‘pure’ phenomenal content of

\(^47\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.viii.
\(^49\) Also, ‘the general positing which characterises the natural attitude’. Husserl *Ideas I*, p.56.
experience. This change in attitude ‘leads our attention back to the subjective achievements in which the object as experienced is disclosed in a determinate manner …’\textsuperscript{51} Husserl argues that by bracketing the general thesis of the natural attitude we discover ourselves to have access to a self-sufficient sphere of consciousness that is an ‘absolutely self-contained realm of purely subjective being’\textsuperscript{52}. As he puts it in \textit{Cartesian Meditations}: the ‘phenomenological epoché lays open (to me, the meditating philosopher) an infinite realm of being of a new kind, as the sphere of a new kind of experience: transcendental experience’\textsuperscript{53}. It is the phenomenologist’s task to give an account of how objects come to be ‘constituted’ within the sphere of ‘pure’ intentional consciousness. Given this, Husserl argues that the proper object of transcendental phenomenology is a ‘transcendental ego’ and its ‘meant contents’.

Merleau-Ponty claims that Husserl misunderstands both the nature and the consequences of the phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty argues that when we ‘break with our familiar acceptance’ of the world, by attempting to perform the Husserlian \textit{epoché} and phenomenological reduction, we are struck by the fact that ‘from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world’\textsuperscript{54}. By which Merleau-Ponty means that the perceived world is experienced as not simply immanent to consciousness, in the Husserlian sense of ‘an ego’ and its ‘meant

\textsuperscript{53} Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, p.27.
\textsuperscript{54} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xv.
contents’, but rather as possessing the character of a brute transcendence as well. These are, he asserts, ‘forms of transcendence’ that we constantly encounter in bodily perception and that the *epoché* and reduction does not and cannot eliminate. Another way he expresses this is by saying that despite our performance of the phenomenological reduction, we cannot but be struck by the primordial fact that the world is ‘always already there’ before any act of reflection on our part\(^5^5\).

As a consequence of this Merleau-Ponty claims that the most important lesson that the attempt to perform Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological reduction ought to teach us is, in fact, ‘the impossibility of a complete reduction’\(^5^6\). The fact that we cannot achieve this complete reduction to the ‘sphere of the transcendental ego’ and its ‘meant contents’, but rather find ourselves confronting the ‘unmotivated upsurge of the world’, means that in our phenomenological description we simply fail to locate Husserl’s transcendental ego – a pure ego that transcends the world – and the putatively self-sufficient sphere of meaning that Husserl understands this ego to inhabit. Instead, what we locate is Merleau-Ponty’s lived ‘body-subject’. This, he argues, is a pre-personal, bodily ‘natural self’ that is necessarily and intimately tied to a world. Thus the meaningful contents and structures of experience that the phenomenologist seeks to capture are only

---

articulable in reference to the environment in which the body-subject is necessarily immersed: ‘we are through and through relation to the world’\textsuperscript{57}.

In the Preface to \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} Merleau-Ponty cites a line from the \textit{Cartesian Meditations} to indicate that his own project is continuous with what he sees as at the core of Husserl’s phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty, quoting Husserl, states: ‘it is that as yet dumb experience … which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning’\textsuperscript{58}. His appropriation and endorsement of this quote is insightful as it exemplifies how he reads Husserl in terms of what he sees as the spirit, as opposed to the letter, of his work. For he views this quote as indicating Husserl’s own implicit recognition of the intrinsic worldliness and situatedness of consciousness. However, whatever the status of Husserl’s alleged implicit recognition, this passage certainly expresses the central goal of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. As Ted Toadvine aptly observes:

This state of continual beginning, of the need for continual re-examination of the paradoxical foundations of a reflection that attempts to grasp its own unreflective origins, could be considered the orienting theme of Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenological method\textsuperscript{59}.

\textsuperscript{58} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xvii.
Merleau-Ponty’s placing of the attempt to grasp the unreflective dimensions of experience that underpin reflection at the centre of the phenomenological method is a significant departure from Husserl’s ‘Intellectualist’ program. Merleau-Ponty argues that, although Husserl is in some ways aware of the implications of the ‘return to phenomena’ that Merleau-Ponty draws out, Husserl’s ‘break’ with his Intellectualist ‘philosophy of essences’ nevertheless remains ‘tacit’. As such, mistaken methodological attachments continue to appear through the work of his later period. Chiefly, argues Merleau-Ponty, this can be seen in his presentation of the reduction, where Husserl continues to write as if the reduction would:

… recognize only one true subject, the thinking Ego … would leave nothing implicit or tacitly accepted in my knowledge … [and] would enable me to take complete possession of my experience and realize the adequation of reflecting to reflected\(^{60}\).

Such a method stands in contradiction with the results of the descriptive phenomenological analysis of lived perceptual experience. Whereas Merleau-Ponty’s existential version of the reduction, he believes, has overcome Husserl’s contradictions.

---

\(^{60}\) Merleau-Ponty quoted in Toadvine, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl’, p.244.
3.1 The Phenomenological Reduction Reveals a Lived Body that Necessarily Inheres in a Concrete Situation

It is Merleau-Ponty’s view that the reduction reveals the subject’s essential inherence in a concrete situation via his necessary embodiment. And what is fundamentally revealed is that this body is a ‘lived through body’ – the body as we directly experience or ‘live’ it as opposed to the body conceived of as a physical object among other physical objects. Thus he argues:

As a meditating Ego, I can clearly distinguish from myself the world and things, since I certainly do not exist in the way in which things exist. I must even set aside from myself my body understood as a thing among things, as a collection of physico-chemical processes. But even if the cogitatio, which I thus discover, is without location in objective time and space, it is not without place in the phenomenological world. The world, which I distinguished from myself as the totality of things or of processes linked by causal relationships, I rediscover ‘in me’ as the permanent horizon of all my cogitationes and as a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself.

And therefore he argues that the correct view:

… does not define the subject’s existence in terms of the thought he has of existing, and furthermore does not convert the indubitability of the world into the indubitability of thought about the world, nor finally does it replace the
world itself by the world as meaning. On the contrary it recognizes my thought itself as an inalienable fact, and does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as ‘being-in-the-world’\textsuperscript{61}.

Consciousness, then, is intrinsically attached to a world, to a concrete situation, that is not reducible to a mere meaning for consciousness. And it is this worldly attachment that makes possible Merleau-Ponty’s new ‘non-idealistic’ interpretation of the reduction. For what the reduction now reveals is the irreducible and essential body-world relation. Merleau-Ponty appropriates the Heideggerean ontological term ‘being-in-the-world’ to capture the fundamental phenomenological and ontological structure of world-relatedness. His conception asserts that the subject is so ‘tightly held’ in his relation to the world that there is no sharp line between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’. Rather, the subject is ‘through and through relation to the world’\textsuperscript{62}.

As a result of this view he argues:

Far from being, as has been thought, a procedure of idealistic philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existential philosophy: Heidegger’s

---

\textsuperscript{61} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xiv.

\textsuperscript{62} I will explore his conception of ‘being-in-the-world’ in more detail in the next chapter.
‘being-in-the-world’ appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction\textsuperscript{63}.

And, as such:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical\textsuperscript{64}.

But why should it reveal the world as ‘strange and paradoxical’? The reasoning behind this claim is basically that, without the ‘prejudice of determinate being’ in place supplying us with a presupposition of determinacy, we now can’t help but see the world as ‘strange’ and ‘paradoxical’ – that is, as \textit{intrinsically ambiguous}.

The ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty is talking about is a direct consequence of our being embodied and manifests phenomenologically in several ways. Let us look at two central ones. Firstly, we can see it in our experience of objects. Spatio-temporal objects, as we perceptually experience them, are never fully determinate but neither are they simply indeterminate. Instead they are a movement from indeterminacy to determinacy that we build up through specific acts of perception as

\textsuperscript{63} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xvi.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.} p.xv.
we perceive the object through a series of related ‘profiles’, as we move around and view the object from different sides, different proximities, pick it up (if we can), etc.\(^{65}\) The perceptual ‘profiles’ progressively form a relatively stable unified meaning, and over a longer span of time this meaning moves in the direction of even greater stability. Nevertheless, it always necessarily falls short of being a fully determinate ‘pure object’. This is because the object necessarily exceeds our total grasp as we cannot in principle perceive it all at once – being embodied beings we lack the ‘God’s eye view’ vantage point that this requires. As a result of the perspectival nature of bodily perception there can be no pure object. No matter how stable the meaning of a given object, it is always, in principle, capable of losing its determinate meaning and being revised as a result of subsequent encounters with the object. Thus it resists the categories of objective thought which wish to make it an unambiguous and fully determinate ‘in-itself’ when, in fact, it has a capacity for indeterminacy and is necessarily ambiguous. It is necessarily ambiguous because its interpretation can never be definitively settled for all time; therefore any determinacy that it has is ultimately relative and not absolute – the determinate can always become indeterminate again.

Secondly, these ambiguous objects are a mirror of the constitution of the body itself, which is never fully constituted as an object open to our gaze. This is because the body is that which gives us an opening onto objects as such. And so the status of the body is ambiguous because it can be viewed as an object (i.e. we are

capable of interpreting our body as a purely mechanistic object as in reductive physiological neuroscience). But, as the phenomenology shows us, its objective dimension can recede and become less visible to us in our directedness upon objects and world. Merleau-Ponty points out, for example, that:

My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects, and reserves among them a quasi-space to which they have no access, and when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province, on this side of all things seen66.

This active exploring, and ambiguous, body-subject plays a central role in the perceptual constitution of objects and world. By standing in a reciprocal relation of constitution whereby spatio-temporal objects are constituted through my bodily engagement with them, I am simultaneously constituted as a bodily subject through the lived spatio-temporality realised in my active bodily exploration of the context that is my fundamental meaningful orientation. The phenomenology of the lived body, by revealing this intimate and intricate process of reciprocal constitution, shows how in our experience the body is never fully ‘object’ or fully ‘subject’ and, by connection, our experience is never fully ‘inner’ experience or fully ‘outer’

---

66 Ibid. p.105.
experience. Rather, we live an ambiguity that defies the traditional dualistic categories, a pure ego outside space (Intellectualism) or a pure object like any other object (Empiricism). Merleau-Ponty captures the way that we are fundamentally ambiguous between ‘mind’ and ‘body’ in his account of humans as ‘body-subjects’. And so, on his account, the phenomenology of the perceived world reveals that ‘ambiguity is of the essence of human existence’. Also, by focusing on the subject as a body-subject Merleau-Ponty makes that subject necessarily situated, for to have a body is to automatically have an anchor point, a location in space and time.

Using a Husserlian phraseology, Merleau-Ponty characterises the reduction as the method that is sufficiently ‘radical’ to put ‘out of play’ the prejudices of the ‘natural attitude’. He reassures us that this procedure is not intended to simply ‘reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things’ which are, ‘on the contrary, the constant theme of philosophy’. However, as they are ‘the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed’. Thus the method requires us to ‘suspend for a moment our recognition of them’ in order to bring what Husserl referred to as the implicit ‘positing’ of the world to explicit attention.

---

68 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.196.
69 e.g. ‘The word ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates … the situation of the body in face of its tasks’. Ibid. p.115.
70 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.xv.
71 Ibid. p.xv.
72 Ibid. p.xvi.
It is important to point out here, in relation to this claim, that although Merleau-Ponty could be presented as a kind of ‘phenomenological realist’, his position is clearly in opposition to realism as it is standardly construed, for example in scientific realism. For Merleau-Ponty is in the business of denying the existence of the ‘real world’, in the objectivist sense of the subject-independent world of the totality of objects and their objective properties and relations, and replacing it with the phenomenologically revealed ‘real world’ – the ontological thesis of the primacy of phenomena. So he is a realist with respect to what he designates as the ‘phenomena’ that arise out of ‘pre-objective being’, which is to say he is an anti-realist in contrast to scientific realism. His view is that ultimately ‘the thing and the world are mysterious’\textsuperscript{73}. They are, ultimately, impenetrable or, as he puts it, ‘they are … an absolute mystery, not amenable to elucidation …’\textsuperscript{74} This is not to say that he thinks that we cannot partially ‘penetrate’ and ‘elucidate’ the ‘thing and the world’, just that they are something that we cannot ever fully or completely hope to penetrate or elucidate. This, Merleau-Ponty holds, directly follows from the fact that we are necessarily embodied and situated beings.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. p.388.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. p.388.
3.2 Husserl’s Intellectualist and Idealist Presuppositions Inconsistent with the Phenomenology of the Perceived World

Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl is unable to reconcile two central and inconsistent aspects of his philosophy arising from his middle and late period work. These are the idealist philosophical commitments presented in *Ideas I* (with the more or less self-sufficient methodology that guides that work), and the implications of the phenomenological descriptions of the ‘Lebenswelt’ (lifeworld) undertaken in his final period. Despite Husserl’s focus on the lifeworld in his final period he still is of the view that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the return to the lifeworld is a ‘preparatory step which should be followed by the properly philosophical task of universal constitution’75. Merleau-Ponty characterises his way of developing phenomenological philosophy as involving an exploration of ‘the unthought of elements’ in the background that Husserl’s analyses of the lifeworld point to76. The inconsistency in Husserl’s position, he argues, is the result of unacknowledged Intellectualist presuppositions that conflict with the results of the phenomenology of the body and of the perceived world.

The problem with Husserl’s version of the reduction, says Merleau-Ponty, is that he presents it as necessarily enmeshed in a transcendental idealist philosophical context. This means that Husserl’s presentation involves a presupposition to the effect that consciousness or subjectivity can be characterised as a self-sufficient

---

76 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ in *Signs*, p.160. This essay was originally included in a centennial memorial volume on Husserl in 1959.
sphere or region of being. As we pointed out earlier, Husserl describes this as ‘infinite realm of being of a new kind … the sphere of … transcendental experience’. Husserl’s version holds that if we ‘bracket’ the ‘general thesis of the natural attitude’, the thesis that there exists a subject-independent world of spatio-temporal objects, then we will discover ourselves to have access to this self-sufficient sphere of consciousness.

Husserl thus talks of the reduction as the operation that brings into view ‘pure’ intentional consciousness, the realm of a ‘transcendental ego’ and its ‘meant contents’. And as we saw earlier, the phenomenologist adopts this perspective through ‘a change in attitude’ that ‘leads our attention back to the subjective achievements in which the object as experienced is disclosed in a determinate manner …’ And so it is the phenomenologist’s task to give an account of how objects come to be ‘constituted’ within the sphere of pure consciousness.

Husserl’s characterisation of the reduction, says Merleau-Ponty, involves a:

… return to a transcendental consciousness before which the world is spread out and completely transparent, quickened through and through by a series of apperceptions which it is the philosopher’s task to reconstitute on the basis of their outcome.

---

77 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.27.
78 *Ibid*.
80 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.xii.
On this view perception is understood as:

… the apprehension of a certain hylè, as indicating a phenomenon of a higher degree, the Sinngebung, or active meaning-giving operation which may be said to define consciousness, so that the world is nothing but ‘world-as-meaning’, and the phenomenological reduction is idealistic …

This Husserlian account understands perception as a ‘meaning-giving’ or ‘sense-bestowing’ by a transcendental ego to its intentional object. The problem with this, however, is that the transcendental ego is disembodied – it is not properly conceived as perceiving by and through the body. As Merleau-Ponty argues, we must not ‘envisage the subject as constituting, and the multiplicity of its experiences or Erlebnisse as constituted: we must not treat the transcendental Ego as the true subject’. This is because ‘reflection is truly reflection … only if it knows itself as reflection-on-an-unreflective-experience’. The concept of the transcendental ego ‘tacitly assumes … that the philosopher’s thinking is not conditioned by any situation’. However, reflection can never ‘lift … itself out of any situation’ because ‘the analysis of perception’ does not ‘do away with the fact of perception, the thisness of the percept or the inherence of perceptual consciousness in some

---

81 Husserl’s term for the ‘material’ or ‘stuff’ of sensation, in contrast to the intentional content of perception.
82 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.xii.
temporality and some locality”86. The concept of the transcendental ego postulates an ‘autonomous transcendental subjectivity’, Merleau-Ponty argues, that is to be ‘found everywhere and nowhere’87. This is because of the failure to locate that subjectivity in a concrete bodily individual (a ‘who’88) perceiving a concrete object (the ‘thisness of the percept’) in a concrete experiential context (an actual ‘locality’).

For Merleau-Ponty, what gets in the way of a fully concrete treatment of perception in the case of Husserl is Husserl’s ‘logicism’89, by which he means the way that Husserl places an unjustified emphasis on an autonomous rationality, and on the universal applicability of syllogistic logical categories unconstrained by experiential context. So, rather than giving an account of our bodily perception just as it is experienced, Husserl, presupposing the prejudice of determinate being, attributes a determinacy to it that it does not possess. For, as Merleau-Ponty argues, our lived perceptual experience is a domain that resists characterisation in terms ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’, ‘inner’ or ‘outer’. Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl’s claim that our lived experience is either a ‘self-contained realm’ or a ‘purely subjective being’90. The being that we perceptually encounter through our body is never fully determinate and its significance can never in principle be made entirely clear, as Husserl, expressing his Cartesian ‘presumptions’, thought that it could. This is because, rather than being a disembodied consciousness surveying the world, human

86 Ibid. p.49.
87 Ibid. p.72.
88 Ibid. p.72.
89 Ibid. p.425.
subjectivity is ‘anchored’ in the body, and it is only through our active bodily explorations that a meaningful world takes shape for us.

As such, Merleau-Ponty can only accurately characterise this phenomenal experience in terms of an inseparable body-world relation. And as a result of its intrinsic situatedness – revealed through phenomenological analysis – consciousness discovers itself to be unable to sufficiently free itself from perceptual experience in order to grasp itself in an absolute reflection, as Husserl had urged. But it also discovers that the perceptual content that we encounter contains a meaning that is not the product of a ‘meaning-giving operation’ of a reflective subject. Rather there is always an unreflected-upon perceptual meaning that resists being ‘absorbed’ by such conceptual ‘sense-bestowing’ acts. Thus, only through giving an account that incorporates the fact of our being situated in the world via our embodiment, and of how the active exploring bodily subject plays a central role in the perceptual constitution of objects and world, can we make sense of perception as it is revealed by phenomenological analyses of it.

What these phenomenological descriptions reveal, argues Merleau-Ponty, is that ‘ambiguity is of the essence of human existence’91. Two principle manifestations of this ontological ambiguity are, firstly, that objects are ambiguous because their interpretation is never definitively settled for all time. They are a movement between determinacy and indeterminacy, never fully determinate, but never simply indeterminate. And, secondly, in our experience the body is never fully ‘object’ or

---

fully ‘subject’ and, by connection, our experience is never fully ‘inner’ experience or fully ‘outer’ experience. We live an ambiguity that defies the traditional dualistic categories: a pure ego outside space (Intellectualism) or a pure object like any other object (Empiricism).

4. Correcting Recent Confusions in the Literature

Merleau-Ponty understands the phenomenological reduction and the transcendental attitude as Husserl’s answer to the problem of psychologism. Psychologism refers to the view that psychology is the discipline that is capable of providing an adequate philosophical theory of consciousness and logic. It views everything exclusively in terms of spatio-temporal beings operating within a causally mechanistic physical world. Psychologism holds that ‘whatever exists … exists as either a physical individual subject to causal laws or as a merely dependent function of physical variations, which variations are themselves governed by fixed laws’\(^{92}\). A psychologistic view thus tends to reduce consciousness to the physical, and so it is traditionally said to be ‘naturalising’ consciousness. Husserl holds that it fails to grasp the psychic properly, ‘collapsing all ideal laws, most importantly, those of logic, and all ideal norms into merely empirical laws and normative

\(^{92}\) Drummond, *Historical Dictionary of Husserl’s Philosophy*, p.142.
generalizations. And it does all of this on the basis of its presupposition of the ‘natural attitude’.

Psychologism is a form of scientism that was dominant in the early twentieth century. It is the ancestor of the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ project in contemporary cognitive science, the project that I discussed in the Introduction and will explore further in the following chapter. This is because both share the view that an empirical ‘science of the mind’ is philosophically adequate to grasp the phenomenon of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty’s main concern in regards to the psychologism issue, and thus in regard to any science of consciousness, lies in the attempt to ‘naturalise’ consciousness. Thus he talks of a ‘psychologism’ in relation to perception that holds that ‘the meaning, connection and ‘truth’ of the percept’ arises from ‘the fortuitous coming together of our sensations as they are given to us by our psychophysiological nature …’

Now, given that psychologism occurs only in the natural attitude, it follows that in the performance of Husserl’s epoché we eliminate psychologism. The problem with this is that the consequence of this move appears to be transcendental idealism. Merleau-Ponty views this consequence as unacceptable because it stands in contradiction with the results of the phenomenology of the body-subject and of the perceived world. This consequence is avoided by Merleau-Ponty’s revised conception of the reduction. Thus, despite the fact that his phenomenological reduction involves a ‘transcendental attitude’, Merleau-Ponty is at pains to

---

93 Ibid.
distinguish his position from the Intellectualist-idealistic interpretation of the reduction given by Husserl. The way that he achieves this is the subject of this section. In order to make the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s reconception clear we will now look at some recent misunderstandings of his account of the reduction, pointing out how they have got him wrong and what a more accurate reading ought to look like.

In recent Anglophone scholarship it has been an issue of some debate just what Merleau-Ponty advocates in his version of the phenomenological reduction. Stephen Priest, for example, argues that Merleau-Ponty ‘replaces the Husserlian concepts of the *epoché*, or phenomenological reduction, and the transcendental ego with the Heideggerian existential category being-in-the-world’. The claim is that Merleau-Ponty's account of human existence as being-in-the-world necessitates a rejection of the *epoché* as a core part of the phenomenological reduction. And this is because the thesis of being-in-the-world is ‘logically inconsistent with the completion of the phenomenological reduction’ due to the fact that the thesis asserts that ‘the subject’s relations to the world are essentially constitutive of the subject’.

Priest’s formulation – ambiguous between a claim about the ‘replacement’ of the reduction and the ‘incompletability’ of the reduction – exemplifies a lack of

95 For an insightful but problematic recent intervention into this debate see: Smith, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction’, pp.553-571. Although Smith makes many helpful observations he does not identify the difference between Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s conceptions of the *epoché* and reduction. We will explore this issue below.


clarity about the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s method. Priest is wrong to characterise Merleau-Ponty as ‘replacing’ the *epoché* with being-in-the-world. This is because the *epoché* is a methodological technique, the retention of which is consistent with the ontological assertion about the body-world relation as being-in-the-world. The correct characterisation is that Merleau-Ponty replaces Husserl’s Intellectualist and idealist version of the *epoché* and reduction with his own ‘perceptualist’ and ‘non-idealist’ version. And, as we have seen, he replaces Husserl’s ontological conception of ‘the transcendental ego and its meant contents’ as a self-sufficient sphere of being with his conception of the body-subject as being-in-the-world.

Merleau-Ponty’s conception is distinct from Husserl’s and, as such, it is a mistake to read Merleau-Ponty’s position too closely to Husserl. We can see this by directly contrasting how Merleau-Ponty and Husserl understand the *epoché* as an operation, and on what that operation is understood to be operating on. Priest says that ‘by the application of the *epoché* or transcendental reduction, the reality of the world of the natural attitude is placed in ontological abeyance’98. He explicates this, stating that ‘in the procedural order of doing transcendental phenomenology the *epoché* is applied to belief in the world of the natural attitude’99, and he understands belief in terms of propositions. So, with respect to a set of such propositions made in the natural attitude it is, as he puts it, ‘no longer assumed that [they] have truth conditions, but this is not denied either’100.

Now Merleau-Ponty does assert that his philosophy ‘places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude’\textsuperscript{101}. However, Priest fails to grasp the full significance of the passage that directly follows this statement. Merleau-Ponty immediately adds:

… but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins - as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status\textsuperscript{102}.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not state it explicitly in this specific context, his considered view is that, although the ‘putting in abeyance’ of ‘the assertions arising out of the natural attitude’ is a necessary condition, as we might say, for overturning the natural attitude, it is not a sufficient one. This is because this approach alone does not identify the unique status of our natural attitude as a ‘kind of ‘faith’ – a kind of primitive perceptual understanding that is so fundamental that it is the condition of the possibility for us either holding, denying or bracketing any of our propositional beliefs, including the ‘general thesis of the natural attitude’. Further, due to its perceptual rootedness, it is not overturnable via purely propositional means as it is, as he puts it, a \textit{perceptual ‘faith’} – our fundamental pre-predicative ‘faith’ in the world that is there for us. It therefore cannot simply be an issue of asserting, denying or bracketing a proposition because the possibility of such propositional contents rest on

\textsuperscript{101} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.vii.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
a background context of the ‘always already there’ ‘world’, which rests on, and takes shape for us through, the process of embodied lived perception. Only by identifying perception’s role in encouraging the ‘mistake of objective thought’ can we truly perform an *epoché* and phenomenological reduction – which now must be taken to mean an overturning of the natural attitude at its source, ‘bracketing’ objectivism in the interest of non-dogmatic philosophical theorising.

Taylor Carman is clearer than Priest that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the reduction is ‘more original to Merleau-Ponty’\(^\text{103}\). But, I would argue, he does not properly explicate in what this originality consists. Carman argues that:

… although Merleau-Ponty spent his career trying to interpret [Husserl’s *epoché* and reduction] in a congenial and fruitful way for his own purposes, the truth is that they are fundamentally incompatible with his own philosophical commitments, especially those he inherited from Heidegger\(^\text{104}\).

So the claim is, as with Priest, that the *epoché* is inconsistent with being-in-the-world.

Although Merleau-Ponty ‘frequently writes with some sympathy for both the transcendental and *eidetic* reductions’, says Carman, ‘he nevertheless evidently regards them as paradoxical and self-defeating, hence strictly speaking

\(^{103}\text{Carman, Merleau-Ponty, p.42.}\)
\(^{104}\text{Ibid. p.39.}\)
impossible'. Carman goes on to observe that Merleau-Ponty’s ‘desire to find in both reductions something philosophically valuable therefore leads him to characterize them in ways that depart widely from Husserl’s account’. The implication is that Merleau-Ponty’s position is confused and that his account, as a methodological reduction, is not coherent. Rather it is essentially a kind of misapplication of the term that results from his tendency to read Husserl extremely sympathetically, and so strive to retain the bulk of his terminology in an existential context in which it is not appropriate.

Consistent with this, Carman characterises Merleau-Ponty as being ‘ambivalent with regard to the transcendental reduction, or epoché, that is, the move from the external world to pure consciousness, or transcendental subjectivity’. He also suggests that Merleau-Ponty views the epoché as ‘a kind of temporary, provisional, merely gradual loosening of our bond with the world, which can be neither dissolved in reflection nor fully apprehended in consciousness’.

But here Carman misinterprets Merleau-Ponty’s metaphorical talk for a description of his practice. Merleau-Ponty says that:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; it steps back to see the

---

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid. p.40.
108 Ibid. p.41.
transcendences spring forth; *it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world in order to make them appear* …\(^{109}\)

This last phrase draws on the metaphor of our ‘interwovenness’ with the world, which is a recurring theme in *Phenomenology of Perception*\(^{110}\). In doing so, it uses the suggestive image of us ‘slackening’ those ‘intentional threads’ that ‘attach us to the world’, evoking the image of a slightly-less-tightly bounded interweaving to represent the phenomenologist’s reflection on the intentional connection itself. But this is a metaphor intended to evoke a sense of our reflection on our primal ‘bond with the world’ – our attempt to ‘see this link, to become conscious of it’\(^{111}\). And so this should indicate that Merleau-Ponty is talking about something other than an attempt to literally loosen our intentional bond. After all, what could this possibly mean? Rather, what we have is a technique whereby we can systematically focus our attention, without objectivistic misrepresentation, on the intentional relation as it is lived.

Nor is Merleau-Ponty’s *epoché* in some sense ‘temporary’ or ‘provisional’. He does say that, with respect to ‘the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things’, given that they are ‘the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed’. Thus we need to ‘suspend for a moment our

\(^{109}\) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘What is Phenomenology?’ p.61 (italics added).


recognition of them\textsuperscript{112}. However, his use of the phrase ‘for a moment’ here is rhetorical and not programmatic. It is rhetorical in the sense of suggesting that the reader entertain the possibility of problematising taken for granted assumptions and provisionally give the phenomenological perspective a try. It also implies that the truths of the natural attitude can be suspended for philosophical reasons but reinstated for other, non-philosophical, purposes. But it is not Merleau-Ponty’s view that the \textit{époque} and reduction are provisional or temporary. They are, on his account, the central feature of a non-dogmatic philosophical method. Hence he says that phenomenological philosophy is ‘accessible only through a phenomenological method’, and also asserts: ‘I have never thought that phenomenology was only an introduction to philosophy; I believe that it is philosophy\textsuperscript{113}.

Merleau-Ponty explains the irreconcilable contradictions confronting Husserl’s position as representing a failure to grasp the way in which a reflective philosophy of the subject must rest on the presupposition of ‘the unreflected’. Thus he argues in \textit{Signs} that we must draw a distinction between the ‘natural attitude’ of our everyday dealings with the world and the ‘theoretical attitude of naturalism’. The correct view of the former sees it as a ‘primordial faith’ that is ‘prior to any thesis’, and that, being ‘more ancient than any ‘attitude’ or ‘point of view’, it ‘gives us not a representation of the world but the world itself\textsuperscript{114}. This is a crucial difference between his and Husserl’s conceptions. Husserl draws a distinction between what he

\textsuperscript{112} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xv.


\textsuperscript{114} Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’, p.163.
calls ‘the natural attitude’ and ‘the naturalistic attitude’. For Husserl the natural attitude involves a tacit thesis to the effect that there exists a world of subject-independent spatio-temporal objects. To be in the natural attitude is to assume this thesis; in ‘bracketing’ this thesis we depart from the natural attitude. The ‘naturalistic attitude’ is the explicit conceptualisation of this thesis into a philosophical position that underpins the natural sciences. Now Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, refuses to conceive of the natural attitude as a ‘thesis’. He argues that it involves more than propositional ‘theses’ as it is a brute primordial fact that cannot simply be bracketed or suspended in the way one might put in brackets a proposition – neither assenting nor not assenting to its content. Instead what is required, on his view, in order to successfully perform the *epoché* and to cultivate a consistent phenomenological perspective, is what Sebastian Gardner has referred to as ‘a positive purgative operation’\(^{115}\). This operation is ‘purgative’ because it seeks to overturn the natural process of perception: ‘to foil its trick’\(^{116}\) of constructing ‘perception out of the perceived’\(^{117}\). It is Merleau-Ponty’s view that the process of perception is ignored in favour of its results, which are determinate objects. And so he says that ‘the natural direction of the process of knowing … goes blindly through the operations of perception straight on to their teleological results’. Given this, he asserts that ‘there is


\(^{116}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.66.

in natural intuition a sort of ‘crypto-mechanism’ which we have to break in order to reach phenomenal being\textsuperscript{118}.

The operation is ‘positive’ because it is actively undertaken by the phenomenologist in a continual and ongoing effort against a natural perceptual process that is extremely difficult to resist. This stands in contrast with Husserl’s characterisation of the ‘bracketing’ of a ‘thesis’. And this is why I earlier referred to Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of the reduction as ‘perceptualist’, in contrast to Husserl’s ‘Intellectualist’ version. Merleau-Ponty holds that it is the natural movement of perception from indeterminacy to determinacy that is at the root of the natural attitude. Thus, in order to ‘bracket’ it, we must find the means by which we can focus on the phenomena of the perceived world just as it is – free, for example, from presuppositions about the ontological determinacy of the world or the amenability of the perceived to the categories of syllogistic logic, presuppositions that Husserl retains.

Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues, fails to sufficiently remove ‘objective thinking’ from his philosophy and thus misunderstands the natural attitude. Husserl fails to remove the ‘objectivist’ presupposition of determinate being and thus misses the true nature of pre-objective perceptual experience as the transcendental ground of both realism and idealism in philosophy\textsuperscript{119}. Instead he attempts to construct

\textsuperscript{118}Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.67.

\textsuperscript{119}This move is entirely new and is unique to Merleau-Ponty, and hence I have dedicated the following chapter to further exploration of what is involved in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of lived perception as transcendental ground. In addition, in Chapter 3 I will explore the conception of the transcendental with which Merleau-Ponty operates.
phenomenology as a ‘new science’ and to reformulate the Kantian concept of the transcendental ego. But, as Merleau-Ponty argues, neither of these moves is phenomenologically defensible.

As a result of the uniqueness of Merleau-Ponty’s account, it is mistaken to imply that when he talks about the reduction he is talking about it in the Husserlian sense of a ‘parenthesizing of the Objective world’$^{120}$ – where ‘the existence of a world’ is taken to be ‘“parenthesized” in consequence of my *epoché”*$^{121}$. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty does use terms and phrases that derive from Husserl’s account, for example ‘reduction’ ‘suspension’, to ‘bracket’, to ‘put out of play’. But, consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s style of philosophising, he ‘co-opt’ these terms, morphing them into his own unique meanings that must be read a) with close reference to the context of the specific point that he is presently making and b) in relation to the overall theoretical picture he is building over the entire arc of the text. For example, he talks about ‘bracketing’ the conception of the world as a totality of objects in the context of a discussion of a ‘phenomenological conception of reflection’ that, in the process of ‘producing’ the ‘genealogy’ of this conception of the world ‘from the starting point of our actual experience’, advances a ‘new definition of the *a priori*’$^{122}$. But, although he does not specify in this section what this ‘bracketing’ actually consists in, the assertions about *a new definition of the a priori* ought to alert us to the novel results he directly relates to his conception of

$^{120}$ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.20.
$^{122}$ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.256.
bracketing in this context. That it is a kind of bracketing consistent with an entirely new conception of the *a priori*.

In a discussion of truth he talks of bracketing beliefs that we hold, but asserts that this is only possible against the background of ‘acquisitions’ of what we have previously believed or done:

> 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 experiences 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*123.

This usage suggests the view that in bracketing beliefs we cannot bracket the complex sedimentary history of meaning and understanding that results from the temporal and cultural nature of our existence. This view indicates an appreciation of our intrinsic cultural and worldly situatedness. In this context he also uses the phrase ‘placing in abeyance’, arguing that:

> In relation to what we are by reason of our acquisitions and this pre-existent world, we have a power of placing in abeyance … I may well close my eyes, and stop up my ears, I shall nevertheless not cease to see, if it is only the blackness before my eyes, or to hear, if only silence, and in the same way I

can ‘bracket’ my opinions or the beliefs I have acquired, but, whatever I think or decide, it is always against the background of what I have previously believed or done.\(^\text{124}\)

So the power of bracketing our beliefs occurs against the background of ‘acquisitions’ and the ‘pre-existent world’ – in other words, our facticity. There is a brute perceptual world – the perceived world – that is ‘pre-existent’ in the sense that it is not the product of any constituting acts of judgment but rather is experienced as ‘already there’, as ‘already constituted’, and providing the context in which such judgements are undertaken. The ‘acquisitions’ represent our individual ‘sedimented’ beliefs and actions that form who we are and how we understand in the present, and are not bracketed in the bracketing of any particular judgement or set of judgements. In short, we cannot ‘bracket’ or place ‘in abeyance’ our facticity.

Merleau-Ponty also uses the Husserlian phrase to ‘put out of play’ but only in the context of arguing that we need to ‘suspend’ the ‘activity’ that results from the fact that ‘we are through and through relation to the world’\(^\text{125}\) – the objectivism that grows out of the natural attitude. The only way for us ‘to become aware of the fact’ that ‘we are through and through relation to the world’ is to ‘refuse it our complicity’. By a ‘refusal of complicity’, through a ‘suspen[son] of the resultant activity’\(^\text{126}\), Merleau-Ponty means here not simply the bracketing of a thesis, but the ‘positive purgative operation’ identified by Gardner. This is because we are

\(^{124}\) Ibid. p.460.
\(^{125}\) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘What is Phenomenology?’ p.61.
‘complicit’ in the ‘resultant activity’ of ‘objective thought’ by virtue of the intrinsic objectifying movement of perception itself.

The less than crystal clear style of Merleau-Ponty’s presentation makes it easy to overlook the full uniqueness of his views. Thus a recent article by Joel Smith designed expressly to clarify the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s reduction falls prey to this problem. Smith presents an intervention into the Anglophone scholarship, arguing that certain readers of Merleau-Ponty are mistaken to think that he does not advocate a version of the phenomenological reduction, pointing out that ‘être au monde is perfectly compatible with the époché’\textsuperscript{127}. Despite this sound observation, Smith himself misreads the reduction when he attributes Husserl’s Intellectualist conception to Merleau-Ponty, a confusion that undermines the critical force of some of Smith’s arguments. He observes that:

Merleau-Ponty makes clear that he in fact accepted the époché as a fundamental methodological principle, whilst simultaneously rejecting what he saw as the transcendental idealist context in which Husserl presented it\textsuperscript{128}.

However, Smith reads this principle through Husserl’s characterisation of it in Ideas 1. For Merleau-Ponty, the époché cannot simply involve – as Smith following

\textsuperscript{127} Smith, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction’, p.553. Smith characterises the reading he is opposing as ‘the standard interpretation’ though he doesn’t argue for this. I think it is perhaps more accurately characterised as a dominant strand within a contested space that is yet to be standardised.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid. p.558.
Husserl asserts – a ‘second-order attitude of indifference towards the positing of the natural attitude’\(^{129}\), if that ‘attitude of indifference’ is understood as ‘a second-order act of parenthesising, or neutralising, performed on the first-order judgement . . . ’\(^{130}\)

This is because Merleau-Ponty does not hold that the natural attitude rests only on the positing of a propositional ‘general thesis’ that might be ‘neutralised’ in this fashion. As I have argued, Merleau-Ponty holds that the natural attitude consists of what he refers to as a ‘primordial faith’ that is ‘prior to’ any such ‘thesis’\(^{131}\). When we try to perform the *epoché* in Husserl’s sense we find that we are confronted with an irreducible body-world relation, which is the source of our having a ‘primordial faith’ that there exists a subject-independent world of spatio-temporal objects. The nature of this pre-reflective intentional body-world relation is revealed by and through our active bodily engagement with the world – and this means in our concrete perceptual experience. The central general structure or pattern inherent in this experience involves a movement from indeterminacy to determinacy. It is this movement that is responsible for the objectivist tendency to ‘congeal’ the ‘whole of existence’\(^{132}\) – a ‘congealing’ of the perceived world into an ‘absolute objectivity’\(^{133}\) by misattributing to the phenomenal contents of experience the ‘absolute existence of the object’\(^{134}\).


\(^{131}\) Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’, p.163.

\(^{132}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.82.


Thus it takes more than a second-order attitude of indifference towards the propositional positing of the natural attitude to overturn this objectivistic movement. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘positive purgative operation’ is designed to ‘foil’ perception’s ‘trick’ of misleading us to overlook the process of perception and instead understand it through its results – determinate objects. Merleau-Ponty understands the \textit{epoché} not as simply operating on our ‘judgements’ about the ‘existence of the world’, as Smith has it, but rather as a process designed to, as it were, unmask the natural attitude at its source. And that source is perceptual. This explains, argues Merleau-Ponty, why it is so difficult to successfully perform the reduction, and so easy to fall back into objective thinking – because we are going against the natural grain of perception itself, its essential structure. This is something that the Intellectualist approach, which views it only as an issue of suspending judgement, fails to see. Smith asserts that the \textit{epoché} is ‘performed on the faculty of judgement’ and adds that it ‘cannot be performed on the faculty of perception’\textsuperscript{135}. However, Merleau-Ponty doesn’t advocate a ‘faculty’ theory. Rather, he argues that all propositional meaning is dependent upon the perceptual meaning that subtends it. As such, he consistently argues that the performance of the \textit{epoché}, rather than being provisional or temporary as Carman suggests, is permanent and ongoing as far as philosophical practice is concerned. This is the case because we need to counter the permanent and ongoing objectifying structure of perception itself.

\textsuperscript{135} Smith, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction’, p.559.
5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at Merleau-Ponty’s main theoretical innovations, which centre on his commitment to phenomenology as the fundamental method for philosophy. I looked at the fundamental contrast he draws between phenomenological description, scientific explanation and Kantian ‘reflective analysis’. I also discussed his view of the *epoché* and the phenomenological reduction. We saw that Merleau-Ponty recognises the phenomenological reduction as a core component of his method despite the fact that it is ‘uncompletable’ in terms of Husserl’s ‘Intellectualist’ conception. And it is ‘uncompletable’ because it reveals us as a body-subject inhering in a concrete situation. I also argued that his view of the *epoché* and reduction has been misrepresented in recent Anglophone scholarship largely because the authors discussed fail to grasp how his conception of the reduction differs from Husserl’s Intellectualist conception. In place of these mistaken views I presented a reading of his phenomenological reduction as not simply the suspension of the propositional ‘general thesis of the natural attitude’. Rather, it involves a ‘positive purgative operation’ that unmasks and overturns the natural attitude at its root in the objective movement intrinsic to the structure of perception itself.

In the following chapter I will continue to build my picture of Merleau-Ponty’s position by providing an account of his conception of intentionality, and of the way that it feeds into his concept of ‘existence’ and his exploration of the existential structure of reality. I will also provide a brief discussion of the body
schema, and of how he sees the taking of a phenomenological approach to
philosophy as necessitating existentialism. In addition, I will put my exegesis to
work in completing the first step of the argumentative trajectory of the thesis: my
critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate.
Chapter 2: Intentionality, Ontology and Scientism

1. Introduction

In Chapter 1 I looked at Merleau-Ponty’s general conception of phenomenological philosophy. I contrasted phenomenological description with scientific explanation and reflective analysis. Correcting misreadings in the recent literature, I also looked at his account of the phenomenological reduction and its key consequences. The two key consequences identified were:

a) Husserl’s Intellectualist and idealist presuppositions were exposed as inconsistent with the phenomenology of the body and of the perceived world; and, connected to this,

b) the phenomenological reduction reveals the subject as a lived body that necessarily inheres in a concrete situation.

In the present chapter I build on this picture by giving a fuller account of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intentionality and the way that it feeds into his concept of ‘existence’ and his exploration of the existential structure of reality. Further to the goal of securing the argument that the uses of Merleau-Ponty in ‘post-cognitivist’ cognitive science fail to grasp the transcendental and ontological dimensions of his philosophy, I will also provide a brief discussion of his concept of the ‘body schema’ and of how he sees a phenomenological approach as necessitating an existential ontology. Lastly, I complete the first step of my three-step argumentative trajectory.
by arguing that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position refuses the possibility of ‘naturalisation’, as conceived in the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate. He does this because that type of ‘naturalisation’ involves the explicit or implicit advocacy of a scientific realist ontology, which he holds as being premised on a philosophical mistake. Instead, he argues, the true philosophical import of the phenomenological study of perception is captured by his existential ontology.

2. Motor-intentionality and Existential Structure

The central insight that marks the difference between Merleau-Ponty’s concept of consciousness and Kant’s is the former’s appropriation and development of Husserl’s notion of ‘operative intentionality’. As he argues in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Husserl distinguishes between intentionality of act, which is that of our judgements and of those occasions when we voluntarily take up a position – the only intentionality discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – and operative intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), or that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language¹.

Kant’s concept of perceptual experience (Erfahrung) is derived from the narrow empiricist concept of ‘outer experience’ where the perceptual content (sensations) are given form by being synthesised by the categories of the understanding in conjunction with the a priori forms of intuition (space and time). As such, ‘the only intentionality discussed in the Critique of Pure Reason’ is that of the ‘intentionality of act’, which is a voluntary act involving the subject’s judgement and its judged content. What this completely overlooks, says Merleau-Ponty, is the background intentionality that makes such voluntary acts of judgment possible: ‘operative intentionality’. This background intentionality is a bodily intentionality that ‘produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life’². That is, the unified meaningful ‘world’ that forms the context of our experience takes shape in relation to the experientially unified structure and capacities of our lived body. We are an intentional lived body that is necessarily correlated with a ‘pre-predicatively’ meaningful world because the world is revealed by and through the active exploration of the body-subject. And it is in this sense that our basic background bodily intentionality is productive of the ‘natural’ unity of the world. Merleau-Ponty says that our operative intentionality is ‘apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see’, as opposed to ‘in objective knowledge’, because our consciousness is fundamentally aiming at, and directed to, a meaningful world – the ‘perceived world’ – through our body via its capacity for movement, perception and also emotion. It is this primary connection with the world that ‘furnishes’ the basic level of meaning that, in our attempts at articulating explicit ‘knowledge’, we try to ‘translate into precise language’.

² Ibid.
What we find when we carefully attend to this ‘pre-reflective’ or ‘operative’
intentionality is that this primary relationship to the world is not the kind of thing that
can be ‘any further clarified by analysis’, as he puts it\(^3\). Instead it is this pre-objective
dimension of consciousness that the philosopher must seek to articulate.

Merleau-Ponty argues that:

Husserl’s originality lies beyond the notion of intentionality; it is to be found
in the elaboration of this notion and in the discovery, beneath the
intentionality of representations, of a deeper intentionality, which others have
called existence\(^4\).

In his new *existential* conception Merleau-Ponty ‘enlarges’ the notion of
intentionality such that it now not only applies to our conscious acts but also
underlies the entirety of our relations with others and with ‘the world’. As he says,
this operative intentionality, also ‘motor intentionality’\(^5\), produces ‘the natural and
antepredicative unity of the world’. It does this not simply in the sense of the objects
being constituted through our bodily engagement with them, a bodily role in the
constitution of perceived objects. Rather, it is involved in the very constitution of the
context in which those objects manifest for a perceiver – ‘the world’ in the
existentialist sense. As such, we have moved from an intentionality of
representations to a primordial bodily intentionality that is now conceived as being

---

\(^3\) ‘Our relationship to the world, as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is not a thing which can be
any further clarified by analysis; philosophy can only place it once more before our eyes and present it


\(^5\) He also uses the term ‘motor-intentionality’ in order to emphasise the way in which this intentional
relation is built around the motility of the bodily subject. I will use the two interchangeably.
involved in the synthesis of time and space, of a spatio-temporal field of experience with a horizontal structure.

Our ‘phenomenal field’ has a horizontal structure in several respects. Firstly, any object that we encounter is said to have an ‘inner horizon’ due to the perspectival nature of perception. As a result of being necessarily embodied perceivers, the objects we intend are visible to us as series of profiles that we encounter as we progressively explore the object. In any particular perceptual act the profile that we presently perceive is not simply experienced as a bare atomistic datum; rather, we are aware of the rear sides of the object as being implicit in our present perception. This does not mean that they are just possible perceptions that we might have but are not presently having. Rather, to see an object involves the possibility of perceiving more of it as being a constituent part of the experience – the ‘sense’ of the perceptual experience ‘seeing an object’. This is the case because it is always perceived as situated in a spatial context relative to other objects that imply a possible perspective that we might take on the object by occupying another spatial relation to the object that we do not presently. This possible perspective is implicit in the perceptual scene in which we necessarily encounter the object perspectivally. And so Merleau-Ponty says that:

The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to the horizon of
an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a certain style, a style which defines the object in question. 

If we were locked in a ‘pure perspective’ and did not take there to be any ‘more’ than what was strictly available in our perceptual field, then the object would not appear to us as an object at all. This is because each profile is experienced as related to other possible profiles via its inherence in a context. And this is just what it is to perceive an object.

Through phenomenological description we also find that the perception of any object involves a figure/ground structure. Any explicit act of attention on a particular object takes place in a spatio-temporal context or ‘outer horizon’. This horizon or context is comprised of implicit objects that we perceive but that nevertheless form an indeterminate meaningful background that makes possible our focus on a specific object. Again we can have no genuine perception of an object other than through this outer horizental structure, which is the necessary background against which we make an object a focal figure. However, the outer horizon of any perceptual experience also contains the world as ‘the horizon of horizons’, as Husserl put it. And so, Merleau-Ponty says, ‘every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the “world”’. And this ‘lived world’ is ‘the permanent horizon of all my cogitations … a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself’. We have a consciousness of what lies beyond our visual field in any particular act – for example, what lies behind our back. It is certainly not explicit

Ibid., p.12.
but nor is it just nothing. It is a meaningful ‘something’ that we have implicit awareness of. This is not intended to signify any sort of conceptual grasp; rather, it is a *perceptual awareness*. We have an appreciation of the extension of space beyond the limits of our phenomenal field as forming a world, in the existentialist sense of the context that provides the background for all possible experience. So ‘to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body’ where ‘all the while the thing keeps its place within the horizon of the world …’

Now the world as unified primordial context is contrasted with a Kantian synthesis, at times also adopted by Husserl, which ‘presupposes, at least theoretically, a real multiplicity which consciousness has to surmount’ \(^{10}\). As we saw in the previous chapter, Merleau-Ponty conceives the subject of this passive synthesis as a ‘relative and pre-personal’ body-subject not a transcendental ego. As a result, he argues that the phenomenologist must broaden his horizon of concerns to include a great deal more than the ‘true and immutable natures’ posited in explicit intellectual acts\(^{11}\).

For Husserl, intentionality signifies the ‘universal fundamental property of consciousness’, which is ‘to be consciousness of something’ \(^{12}\) – to be always directed towards an ‘object’. His concept of ‘intentional analysis’ consists in reflection on the phenomena of our intentional experience in terms of its act-object (*noesis*-*noema*) structure. He uses the intentional object – the ‘what of givenness’ – as the guiding thread of his intentional analysis. However, he concentrates for methodological

---

\(^{9}\) Ibid. p.42.
\(^{10}\) Ibid. p.322.
\(^{11}\) Ibid. p.xx.
\(^{12}\) Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, p.33.
reasons on the analysis of the ‘how of givenness’. As a result of Husserl’s general concern with the laying bare of the structures of the transcendental ego he inevitably concentrates on intentional acts of consciousness that are understood as acts of this ego.

Now given the fact that his intentional analysis takes place in the context of his attempt to refer the structures revealed in descriptive phenomenology back to the structures of the Ego, it follows that analysis of intentional acts undertaken within this framework develops into an idealist ontology. This is because, as we saw in the previous chapter, an approach that leads to an increasing focus on the constituting acts of a transcendental consciousness loses sight of the inherence of consciousness in a body and in a situation. This makes inevitable a move towards an ‘Intellectualist’ transcendental idealism – an idealism that the methodology of a presuppositionless openness to things themselves might seem putatively designed to avoid.

With respect to understanding Merleau-Ponty’s modification and expansion of the concept of intentionality, it is important to see his central concern with exposing the dimension of passivity in his analysis of intentional acts. The analysis he undertakes presupposes the connectedness of the acts in ‘inner time’ – lived experiential temporality – as opposed to objective time. On Merleau-Ponty’s account the ‘constitution’ of ‘inner time’ is pre-given to all acts of consciousness. As the constitution of this temporality is primordially passive it is not produced by the acts of a reflecting ego. Rather, it is an essential and necessary pre-condition of intentionality and is constitutive of its horizontal structure. Husserl’s idealistic ontological interpretation of this phenomenological structure results, argues Merleau-
Ponty, from his restriction of intentional analysis to the framework of ‘static phenomenology’. That is, the approach of giving a structural account of *fully constituted objects* and of *the acts* in which those objects are presented to the phenomenologist. This account stands in contrast to a ‘genetic phenomenology’, which emphasises the temporal dimension of our experience. Merleau-Ponty advocates an analysis of the ‘coming-to-be’ (also ‘becoming’, ‘genesis’) of the fully constituted objectivities of the lived world – essentially the building up of sense through time. It is this attempt to uncover the origins of the ‘sedimented’ layers of meaning that constitute objectivity that leads Merleau-Ponty’s attention to ‘the world’ as the ‘horizon’ and ‘background’ against which objects are given to active ‘body-subjects’. These body-subjects are understood as ‘self-temporalising’ – in the sense that they ‘live’ a ‘primordially passive’ temporality which is constituted *through them* as a function of their ‘being-in-the-world’, not by any of their conscious acts. As Merleau-Ponty makes clear, the ‘static’ view of the idealist Husserl encounters serious problems when confronted with the issues of passive synthesis that cluster round the themes of perception, the constitution of the body, the problem of the givenness of the bodily other and of the background or world that necessarily provides the context in which the other problems arise.

His principle strategy with respect to drawing out the philosophical implications of intentionality is to argue that in the broadening of the concept of intentionality, through the notion of motor-intentionality, we now see that it in fact applies to holistic human events. As such, the job of intentionality is now no less than the revelation of the ‘structure of being’. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, it lies in grasping the ‘unique core of
existential meaning’ which provides the conditions for cognition and action in the world, and by so doing provides the conditions of possibility for Empiricist and Intellectualist forms of theorising. With a broadened conception of intentionality combined with an existentialist recasting of the phenomenological reduction, we are now in a position, he asserts, to address ourselves to the ‘question of being’. We may succeed where Husserl, due to his pronounced ‘Intellectualist’ and ‘logicist’ tendencies, had failed. Intentionality, in other words, is now understood in its fully ontological dimension. When we couple this with the reconception of the subject as a ‘body-subject’ we now understand this intentionality as being primarily and primordially a pre-reflective bodily-intentionality, a ‘motor-intentionality’. And what this motor-intentionality makes plain is the essential situatedness of the subject in an environmental context. And thus it reveals as its ontological dimension the fundamental structure of our being – ‘being-in-the-world’ – as what makes bodily-intentionality possible.

In Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to articulate fundamental existential structures, the results of a series of phenomenological investigations that were originally carried out in an ‘ontologically disinterested manner’ by Husserl are reinterpreted in the light of the question of the meaning of Being. The inspiration for Merleau-Ponty’s move here comes from Martin Heidegger’s project for a fundamental ontology in Being and Time. Heidegger’s conception of ‘fundamental ontology’ holds that it is the job of phenomenology to subserve ontology, and that the foundational question of ontology is that of the meaning of being in general. Thus, he is asking what he views to be the most fundamental of philosophical questions: what does it mean for anything to be? Or alternatively, where does ‘to be’ derive its meaning? He
understands this approach to ontology to be fundamental because he is concerned with articulating the foundation of all other ontological and metaphysical approaches, as well as the various positive sciences that are philosophically dependent on them. For Heidegger ‘traditional ontologies’ concentrate their attention on ‘what there is’, on entities, rather than on ‘how it is’, on Being. This means that they tend to neglect the ‘how’, failing to grasp its significance, or try to explain the ‘how’ in terms of the ‘what’ – reducing Being to the totality of entities and their relations.

In order to grasp the meaning of Being – how ‘to be’ derives its meaning – he argues that we need to undertake what he calls ‘an existential analysis of Dasein’. This consists of an inquiry into the kind of Being that we ourselves have. The reason for this is that ‘Dasein’ – literally ‘there-being’, the kind of Being that humans instantiate – is the being to whom entities appear. Thus the Being of these entities is in some sense manifest to Dasein. Dasein is also unique among beings, according to Heidegger, in that it is the only being whose Being is a problem for it. That is, it is an essential aspect of Dasein that it raises questions as to the nature of its own Being – it is therefore ontological. Heidegger, like Merleau-Ponty after him, argues that a phenomenological approach reveals us as necessarily situated in a world that is opaque and thus necessarily exceeds our attempt to capture it in theoretical thought.

Given that we have no explicit conceptual grasp of Being but rather are at the mercy of the ‘opacity of the fact’13, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the correct way to proceed is via an explication of Dasein’s ‘pre-ontological understanding of Being’. This understanding is ‘pre-ontological’ because in our lived experience in the lifeworld

---

we have an implicit understanding of Being due to the fact that entities manifest themselves to us in their particular ways of Being in our active pre-theoretical engagement with them in everyday life\textsuperscript{14}. This understanding is implicit as opposed to ontology, which is an explicit theoretical articulation.

The process of making this implicit understanding explicit will provide us with an account of the structures that underpin the manifestation of the phenomena in their great variety of forms. This fundamental account of the ‘existential structures’ that underpin the entities thus presented is, in Heidegger’s terms, ‘an account of the Being of entities’. Thus the structure and content of lived experience, as revealed through methodical phenomenological description, is situated in terms of its ‘existential ground’: ‘that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood’\textsuperscript{15}. Heidegger’s analysis seeks to lay bare the essential structures (‘existentialia’ in his terminology) of our ‘pre-reflective’ and ‘factual’ worldly existence. ‘Being’, on this conception, cannot refer to a thing or a property of a thing. It is a unique dimension that provides us with the possibility of ‘objective thinking’, to use Merleau-Ponty’s term. Traditional metaphysics fails to grasp this fundamental ‘ontological difference’ in its marked tendency to confuse ‘being’ with ‘substance’.

\textsuperscript{14} See \textit{Being and Time}, section 43. e.g. ‘The question of the meaning of Being becomes possible at all only if there is something like an understanding of Being. Understanding of Being belongs to the kind of Being which the entity called ‘Dasein’ possesses. The more appropriately and primordially we have succeeded in explicating this entity, the surer we are to attain our goal in the further course of working out the problem of fundamental ontology’. Martin Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p.244.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.} p.2.
When Heidegger, and following him Merleau-Ponty, refers to an ‘existential structure’ he is referring to that which underpins and expresses the uniqueness of the human way of existing as opposed to, say, a rock that is indifferent to its Being. Dasein – unlike an object – relates itself to its own Being. This Being to which it is related is its ‘existence’. ‘Existence’ is a technical term for Heidegger (and Merleau-Ponty) which is reserved for the unique human mode of Being. It refers to his characterisation of the human mode of Being as ‘Ek-sistence’. The prefix ‘ek’, meaning ‘out’ is intended to indicate something crucial about Dasein’s way of Being.

Heidegger understands Dasein’s ‘Ek-sistence’ as a process of ‘standing outside’ oneself through one’s being inextricably involved in the world. He also characterises this unique form of temporalised Being in terms of being ‘ahead of oneself’ due to Dasein’s ongoing orientation towards its future goals and projects, its ‘possibilities’.

The reason that Heidegger employs this term is to make a clear distinction between the notion of human beings in traditional metaphysics as ‘static, ahistorical and self-sufficient substances’ and his conception of Dasein as a ‘dynamic, world-oriented and self-interpreting’ being. In stressing that human being stands ‘ahead of’ and ‘outside of’ itself he intends this in both a temporal and a spatial sense. In the temporal sense he means to indicate that the future-oriented plans and projects that are part of the process of self-creation – in the sense of self-definition and self-interpretation – are always in an ongoing process of being enacted, but are also in an

---

16 Heidegger employs the hyphenated form of this term to recall its original Greek and Latin meaning, ‘to stand outside of’ or ‘to stand out from’.

ongoing process of being revised. The spatial sense in which we are ‘ahead of’ and ‘outside of’ ourselves concerns the way in which our actions consist in the projecting of ourselves into a world where we stand in a relationship to things of meaningful concern – the vast variety of worldly things that we encounter matter to us in a basic way. They are not simply objects of indifferent rational inspection.

This conception of phenomenology pressed exclusively into the service of the ‘question of Being’, in particular that of the absolute origin of all Being prior to the ‘subject-object’ framework of indifferent rational inspection, is the ontological context for Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenological analyses. Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of this conception is evidenced when his discussion of intentionality in a more Husserlian idiom moves into an explicitly Heideggerean ontological register. For example, he says:

In our opinion Husserl’s originality lies beyond the notion of intentionality; it is to be found in the elaboration of this notion and in the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representations, of a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence.¹⁸

And again:

In Husserl’s language, beneath the ‘intentionality of the act’, which is the thetic consciousness of an object, and which, in intellectual memory for example, converts ‘this’ into an idea, we must recognize an ‘operative’

intentionality (fungierende Intentionalität) which makes the former possible, and which is what Heidegger terms transcendence\textsuperscript{19}.

It is important to see how radical Merleau-Ponty’s move is, even within the context of classical phenomenology. In making the existentialist move he essentially argues that the methodology and theory of phenomenological philosophy, as Husserl conceived it, founders on the rocks of the phenomenology of pre-reflective lived perceptual experience and its resistance to being fully captured through conceptual representation. Thus, when accused of going ‘beyond phenomenological description’ and ‘taking sides’ in traditional ontological disputes, Merleau-Ponty rejects the charge and asserts: ‘I have never thought that phenomenology was only an introduction to philosophy; I believe that it is philosophy’\textsuperscript{20}.

It is the broadened conception of intentionality that also leads the phenomenological philosopher to broaden his horizon of concerns to include a great deal more than the ‘true and immutable natures’ posited in explicit intellectual acts. As he argues at the end of the Preface:

Whether we are concerned with a thing perceived, a historical event or a doctrine, to ‘understand’ is to take in the total intention – not only what these things are for representation (the ‘properties’ of the thing perceived, the mass of ‘historical facts’, the ‘ideas’ introduced by the doctrine) – but the unique mode of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass or the

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.} p. 486.
\textsuperscript{20} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity’, p.234.
piece of wax, in all the events of a revolution, in all the thoughts of a philosopher. It is a matter, in the case of each civilization, of finding the Idea in the Hegelian sense, that is, not a law of the physico-mathematical type, discoverable by objective thought, but that formula which sums up some unique manner of behaviour towards others, towards Nature, time and death: a certain way of patterning the world … ²¹

It is here that we see the link between his concept of pre-reflective intentionality and his conception of existential ontology. This broadened concept of intentionality enables us to see how the phenomenological focus on the description of the structure of lived experience moves us from the idea of an ‘intentionality of representations’ to that of the motor-intentionality that subtends it. And if we ask about the ontological status of the intentional phenomena of the body-world relation, it opens us on to a full scale investigation of being – an existential ontology. This is precisely why Merleau-Ponty says, in explicit reference to his appropriation of Heidegger, that ‘beneath the intentionality of representations’ there is ‘a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence²². And for its exploration neither the causal explanations of the ‘Empiricist’ nor the transcendental deductions of the ‘Intellectualist’ are appropriate. What is required is existential interpretation that seeks to express ‘the unique mode of existing’ of the subject matter in question. This process rests on the

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.vxx.
²² Ibid. p.140 (italics added).
descriptive phenomenology of perception but clearly goes beyond it in its interpretative ontological method\textsuperscript{23}.

The application of this broadened conception of intentionality to the interpretation of human events, as Ted Toadvine observes, enable us:

\ldots to \textit{grasp the ‘structure of being’} manifest through all possible relationships by which the events may be explained: economic, psychological, ideological, etc. At the intersection of each of the partial approaches to explanation, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, lies a ‘unique core of existential meaning’\textsuperscript{24}.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to ontology operates via a phenomenology that, looking to the ‘deeper intentionality’ that subtends the ‘intentionality of representations’, attempts to trace the ‘genesis of meaning’ through to an interpretation of the primordial ‘structure of being’ that subtends and makes possible the claims about subjects and objects that animate the ultimately false dichotomy of realism and idealism. The ‘chief gain’ of this approach, Merleau-Ponty argues, is that it has ‘united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world’. This is clearly not ‘a world in the realist sense’ but rather a world that is ‘inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity’\textsuperscript{25} – the world that we live, the perceived world.

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{23} It is in this sense that the title \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} fails to suggest the full content of Merleau-Ponty’s major work.\\
\textsuperscript{24} Toadvine, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl, p.241 (Merleau-Ponty quote from \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xxi).\\
\textsuperscript{25} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xxii.
\end{flushright}
2.2 Motor-intentionality, Body Schema and Ontology

As mentioned earlier, in addressing the contradictions inherited from Husserl it becomes imperative to account for the phenomena of embodiment. It is a central component of Merleau-Ponty’s view that the incomplete nature of the constitution of the body has the important consequence of ruling out the core Husserlian concept of a transcendental ego. Thus Merleau-Ponty provides his famous account of the ‘lived body’, or the ‘body-subject’. As we have seen, he views the subject of perception as necessarily a bodily one. And the kind of necessity involved here is ontological necessity. That is to say, there can exist no subject of perception that is not embodied. And the body functions as ‘the subject of perception’, and thus of ‘motor-intentionality’, by means of what he calls the ‘body schema’.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the philosophical significance of the bodily nature of perception is that my body constitutes my perspective on the world. My relation to my body is unlike my relation to anything else to which it affords me perceptual access. This is because my body is that through which I have a world. As Merleau-Ponty argues, what ‘prevents my body’ ever being ‘completely constituted’ as ‘an object’, is the fact that ‘it is that by which there are objects’. Therefore ‘the body … is not one more among external objects’. For example, I can observe some parts of my body by means of others, such as looking at my hand or touching the back of my head. But I cannot make my body as a whole an object of perception. It is thus

---

26 Ibid. p.105, p.472.
27 The concept is an adaptation of the concept of the ‘transcendental schema’ originating in Kant’s conclusion that ‘there must be a third thing’ that mediates between concepts and intuitions by having something in common with both.
28 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.105.
29 Ibid.
impossible to shed our own perceptual agency and simply observe ourselves as we observe objects in the world. For example, Merleau-Ponty observes that when perceiving one’s own reflection in the mirror the reflected ‘body in the mirror never stops following my intentions like their shadow’\textsuperscript{30}. However, by doing this I am not genuinely observing my body in the way that I observe objects in my everyday encounters with them. This is because, unlike in my everyday viewing of an object, where ‘observation consists in varying the point of view while keeping the object fixed’, the reflected bodily image that I perceive in the mirror is ‘given to me as a simulacrum of my tactile body’ because it ‘imitates its initiatives instead of responding to them by a free unfolding of perspectives’\textsuperscript{31}.

This asymmetry indicates the way that the structure of perception is \textit{constituted} by the structure of the body. Perception is not just a simple presence of objects to a subject but has the \textit{horizontal} structure that we discussed in the previous section. For example, no matter how accurately a photo can be said to represent an object, seeing the photo can never be the same as seeing the object itself. This is because the visual field has \textit{horizons} determined by the structure of the body, whereas photos simply have \textit{edges}. And so Merleau-Ponty argues that these horizons of perceptual experience are functions of the body through which this experience is realised. Along with horizontality, all perception has, as we saw, a figure/ground structure: ‘the perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else’\textsuperscript{32}. This figure/ground structure is not ‘deducible \textit{a priori} from the concept of

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. p.4.
perception, and hence applicable to all possible perceivers. But nor is it, on the other hand, a merely contingent feature of experience, one that we can conceive our experience as lacking. Thus this figure/ground structure is part of a contingent a priori structure of perception. As Taylor Carman points out:

> It is contingent because it is, after all, a phenomenological function of the structures and capacities of the body, yet it is a priori inasmuch as it provides a stable ground or framework within which we are able to recognize some aspects of our experience as genuinely contingent and changeable.

So, Merleau-Ponty claims that our phenomenal field is also a ‘transcendental field’. That is, we can take a transcendental perspective on the contents and structure of the phenomenal field, enquiring about perceptual possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities. And thus, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘body schema’ anchors his account of the bodily nature of perception as a whole. The body schema is that which, prior to our applying of explicit concepts to it, structures our experience of the world in terms of a set of basic bodily capacities that are geared into a pre-objective world which calls on those capacities in a kind of ‘dialogue’ between body and world. Thus, for example, when we learn a new dance move, which requires of us the picking up of a certain habit of movement, it is Merleau-Ponty’s view that ‘it is the body that “understands” in the acquisition of [this] habit’. In the case of object perception this means that the perception of objects is already structured by

---

33 Carman, Merleau-Ponty, p.104.
34 Ibid. p.105.
35 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.168.
my body and its sense of its own possibilities. So saying that perception is grounded in the body, as he does, is to say that the \textit{phenomenal field} is constituted by the \textit{body schema}. That is, our basic bodily structure and capacities serve to constitute a perceptual world that we experience ‘motor-intentionally’ as necessarily perspectival, horizontal and structured by figure/ground relations. It follows from this that the ‘structure of being’ that Merleau-Ponty’s account seeks to lay bare can be revealed to the reflecting subject only through the \textit{a priori} body schema that structures the subject’s perceptual world. Thus, in playing an anchoring role in his account of the bodily nature of perception, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body schema also anchors his broader ontological account. This is because it helps to articulate the nature of primordial existential structures (\textit{a priori} structures of being): the ‘body-subject’ (with its body schema) as fundamentally ‘being-in-the-world’.

### 3. The Necessity of Existentialism – the Philosophy of Concrete Human Existence

Given that reflection is grounded in pre-reflective perception, and that we always experience this as in some minimal sense meaningful, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are a subject whose experience is \textit{essentially} meaningful. We are, as he puts it, ‘condemned to meaning’\textsuperscript{36}. The kind of subject that we are, as we have seen, is one that is necessarily embodied; as such, it is necessarily grounded in a world of

\textsuperscript{36} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xxii. This is Merleau-Ponty’s critical reworking of Sartre’s slogan ‘we are condemned to freedom’. Cf: ‘We are always in a plenum, in being, just as a face, even in repose, even in death, is always condemned to express something’: \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.525.
situated pre-reflective bodily meaning. This lived experience, he argues, is something that is common to human beings as an organic species due to universally shared structures of perception and embodiment (the body schema), which for Merleau-Ponty are the structures through which being is necessarily disclosed.

Merleau-Ponty makes the transcendental argument that pre-objective perceptual experience provides the ‘ground’ for conceiving of the world in terms of subjects and objects. This entails the idea that the lived experience of the historically situated subject is the source and basis of all our knowledge claims. This source, however, is not transparent to the reflecting philosopher. Rather, it is ‘opaque’, always exceeding our ability to fully grasp it in reflection. This is because all our acts of reflection are subtended by a primordial perceptual relationship with pre-objective being, the lived background against which those acts stand out and on which those acts are ultimately grounded. In discovering ‘the fundamental fact that we exist before we reflect’, we also discover that our basic way of existence is not only ‘opaque’, but also ‘ambiguous’ (in the sense of being always in principle amenable to multiple interpretation). And so Merleau-Ponty argues that in attempting to carry out Husserl’s method it will inevitably be discovered that:

When I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience; moreover my reflection cannot be unaware of itself as an event, and so it appears to itself in the light of a truly creative act, of a changed structure of consciousness, and yet it has to recognize, as having priority over its own

---

operations, the world which is given to the subject because the subject is
given to himself.\(^{38}\)

Thus, the very process of attempting to carry out the philosophical method Husserl
prescribes in Ideas I demonstrates to us the necessity of existentialism. This is
because, as he puts it in the Preface to Phenomenology of Perception, ‘the most
important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete
reduction\(^{39}\). That is to say, when we ‘break with our familiar acceptance’ of the
world, via the reduction, and systematically focus our attention on the contents and
structure of phenomenal consciousness just as we experience it, ‘we can learn
nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world’\(^{40}\) – the brute fact of the existence
of a transcendent world that is ‘always already there’ before any act of reflection, or
indeed any particular perceptual act.

The epistemological thesis of ‘the primacy of perception’ and its
correlate, the ontological thesis of ‘the primacy of phenomena’, come together in
Merleau-Ponty’s version of the Cartesian conception of privileged epistemic access.
That is, he holds that first person consciousness provides us with direct unmediated
access to emergent pre-objective being. In Merleau-Ponty’s version of the Cartesian
claim the privileged mode of access is by way of phenomenologically reduced
perception, which is for him access to the real – that is, the ‘phenomenal being’
manifest through the ‘phenomenal field’ of our direct experiential encounter. There
is, however, an important continuity with the Cartesian/Kantian/Husserlian tradition

\(^{38}\) Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.xi.
\(^{39}\) Ibid. p. xv.
\(^{40}\) Ibid.
in terms of the first person approach coupled with the search for a method that would ensure the truth of ontological claims made from this vantage point. It is not simply that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is undertaken from the vantage point of the first person (in Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological sense). It attempts to provide a method that will stand as the backbone of a (more or less) systematic justification for the philosophical claims subsequently advanced. And it endeavours to demonstrate the superiority both of the method and of the advanced claims it makes with respect to the rivals of Intellectualist idealism and scientific realism.

This philosophy, as we have seen, is necessitated by the problem of the contradictions engendered in the theoretical claims of Husserl’s ‘static phenomenology’ of *Ideas 1*, which stand in contrast with the implications of the phenomenological analyses of the body and of perception. Following these implications through serves as the motivation behind Merleau-Ponty’s claim that his existential phenomenology is:

... a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’.

Merleau-Ponty’s position is designed to address contradictions in the account of the constitution of the body, and of passive synthesis generally, that he inherits from Husserl. It is Husserl’s achievement, following in the footsteps of Descartes and Kant, to make explicit precisely what a subject-centred philosophical method

\[41 \text{Ibid. p.vii.}\]
must look like. Husserl’s work is, in a sense, a summation of the tradition, a spelling out of just what needs to be done in order to fulfill the promise of the Cartesian philosophy of the subject. But it is the conflict that arises between the position outlined in *Ideas I* – with its explicit formulation in terms of the phenomenological method – and his self-interpretation of the transcendental idealist ontology this method putatively entails, which necessitates phenomenology taking the existentialist turn that it does.

Merleau-Ponty’s work demonstrates that the option of a return to a notion of the Kantian-Husserlian epistemological subject of self-transparent reason can no longer be seriously entertained. This is the case due to the implications of phenomenological analyses undertaken initially by Husserl himself, and then taken up and extended by Merleau-Ponty. These analyses serve to indicate the dependence of the subject on his embodiment, and on a natural and cultural ‘lifeworld’, for his own self-conception. Merleau-Ponty, for his part, collapses the role of transcendental theorising as Husserl had conceived it in *Ideas I* into his existential-hermeneutic claims about the nature of the emergence of meaning in pre-objective lived experience. Viewed from the perspective of the Husserlian phenomenologist seeking to apply Husserl’s phenomenological method to address questions of ontology, it must be admitted that Merleau-Ponty’s move to significantly curtail the role of transcendental theorising and to focus on a phenomenology of the emergence of meaning in pre-objective lived experience is undertaken for good phenomenological reasons. For, in doing this Merleau-Ponty is arguably being true to

---

42 I will be discussing exactly what Merleau-Ponty means by transcendentalism in the following chapter.
the phenomenology of perception and the body that arises primarily out of Husserl’s own analyses.

4. Existentialism is a Naturalism … but not a Scientism

In this chapter we have arrived at a view of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘existential phenomenology’ as a distinctive position that has developed through a critique of Husserl’s conception of transcendental phenomenology. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s overriding concern is with the ‘question of Being’ and, as such, he has an original conception of the phenomenological reduction, intentionality and the subject that reflect this ontological focus. He also demonstrates how a phenomenological approach to ontological questions must consist in a ‘constructive’ phenomenology that re-interprets descriptions made within the methodological reading of the reduction in terms of a version of the reduction as an integral component of an existential ontology.

In this final section of the chapter I will now reconnect with the theme that was introduced in the Introduction, and which initially motivated our enquiry: the use of Merleau-Ponty for cognitive science and cognitive science-inspired philosophy of mind. As stated in the Introduction, the aim of the thesis is to demonstrate the full philosophical import of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology through an explication of his method and of the claims that he arrives at via this method. My exegetical and critical work, including my corrective reading of the reduction, addresses itself to two mains targets via a three step argumentative trajectory. These
two targets are: recent scientistic appropriations of Merleau-Ponty and recent philosophical misreadings in the Anglophone literature. The three steps of my argument move from:

1. making a critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate, to;

2. addressing the question of the correct interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position, specifically, critiquing recent claims regarding the phenomenological reduction (Chapter 1), transcendentalism (Chapter 3) and dialectics (Chapter 4); to

3. a critique of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of ‘the primacy of perception’ and a suggested modification to his position.

In relation to this three-step argument, I am now in a position to complete the first of these steps: a critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate. This chapter and the previous one, taken together, have provided us with a picture of Merleau-Ponty’s key methodological and theoretical commitments sufficient to substantiate our intervention. Let us now draw out the implications of the picture provided by my ‘counter-reading’ for these recent scientistic appropriations of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.
4.1 The ‘Naturalisation of Phenomenology’ Project and the Cognitive Sciences

As I explained in the Introduction, my exploration of Merleau-Ponty is initially motivated by the recent use of his work in the cognitive sciences and in cognitive science-inspired philosophy of mind. In the Anglophone world since the 1970s there has been what is sometimes referred to as a ‘naturalistic turn’ in philosophy. This has involved a ‘turning away’ from a conception of philosophy as consisting principally in \textit{a priori} methods of conceptual analysis, and towards a conception of philosophy as continuous with the natural sciences. This turn has been, in significant measure, inspired by the advances in ‘cognitive science’, the new interdisciplinary science of cognition where cognition is taken in its broad sense to include perception and emotion.

Theorists in the new interdisciplinary projects of the cognitive sciences take themselves to be in the business of constructing the first plausible scientific theory of consciousness. Although it has been largely ignored until very recently, interest in the phenomenological dimension of cognition has been steadily increasing in recent years. Within the last two decades the work of Merleau-Ponty has played a particularly prominent role in inspiring and guiding the development of a critique of the traditional conception of cognitive science as computational analysis and unconscious information processing that rests on the idea of the brain as functioning like a computer.

Recent readings of Merleau-Ponty’s work as representing a strain of theorising that is consonant with the cognitive sciences have not been particularly concerned with exegetical issues in Merleau-Ponty scholarship. It is not the primary
intention of these readers to reconstruct his position with exegetical precision. Rather, they claim that they are reading him primarily with an interest in the apparent convergence between his phenomenological descriptions and the results of contemporary cognitive science. The incorporation of these ideas in the context of cognitive science positions Merleau-Ponty in continuity with developments in cognitive science and cognitive science-oriented philosophy of mind, as well as being an important precursor to contemporary accounts.

The recent increase of interest in the role of the phenomenology of embodied perception by ‘post-cognitivists’, and their enthusiastic use of Merleau-Ponty’s work, raises important questions about these readings and the philosophical import they take Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to have. In cognitive science, and in much philosophy of mind, Merleau-Ponty is read as offering a theory of perception consisting of a set of phenomenological descriptions. From this set of phenomenological descriptions, a set of arguments is derived that are said to be convergent with work in the empirical cognitive sciences and in contemporary philosophy of mind – for example, regarding the intimate interdependence of perception and action, the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience and the irreducibility of bodily perception. These readers of Merleau-Ponty are often said to be involved in what is referred to as a ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’. They understand naturalisation as a project that attempts to bridge the ‘explanatory gap’ that exists between phenomenological accounts and scientific models of consciousness. This project is driven by the view that phenomenology has to be, as

---

43 See Introduction, n.48.
Roy et al. put it, ‘integrated into an explanatory framework where every acceptable property is made continuous with the properties admitted by natural science’⁴⁴. Naturalisers of this kind hold, either explicitly or implicitly, that this program holds out the promise of overcoming the untenable ontological dualism that persistently haunts the philosophy of mind, and is reproduced in the cognitive sciences.

If chapters 1 and 2 have done their job then they should have combined to shed some light on the relationship between this debate and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical views. For example, it should now be apparent that the term ‘naturalisation’, though perhaps the right one when applied to Husserl, is the wrong term when applied to the process of making Merleau-Ponty’s work conducive to the project of the cognitive sciences. The reason for this, I would argue, is that Merleau-Ponty is already a naturalist, though not a scientistic one. It is my view that Merleau-Ponty is a ‘liberal naturalist’ whose method has a significant transcendental aspect. As such, we need a term to capture the moves that need to be performed in order for his philosophy to be reinterpreted within the framework of cognitive science. Given our reading of his position, it would seem appropriate to characterise this as: a reinstatement of the ‘natural attitude’. If this is accepted then we might concede that, at least in this sense, it is a naturalisation. However, there are two problems with this. Firstly, liberal naturalists might legitimately complain about this use of the term ‘naturalisation’ and argue that it is being wrongly equated with the term ‘scientism’. This is a justified protest because the term ‘scientism’ is logically only a subset of ‘naturalism’. And, secondly, given Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation

of the natural attitude as being a ‘primordial faith’ rooted in the objectivising structure of perception, it is perhaps rather the ‘naturalistic attitude’ that develops as a result of building a scientistic theoretical view out of the relative determinacy delivered through this natural perceptual movement that is the real candidate. Thus, it would seem to be preferable, strictly speaking, to talk of a ‘scientising’. This attempted scientising of phenomenology – this reinstatement of the natural and the naturalistic attitudes – reverses the methodological procedure explicitly laid out by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Thus, in jettisoning the reduction, it ‘de-transcendentalises’ his phenomenology, reinstating ‘objective thought’ with its ‘prejudice of determinate being’.

If we revisit the examples that we raised in Chapter 1, in light of our exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position, we can see this scientising at work. Hubert Dreyfus, as we saw, suggests that we might equate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an ‘intentional arc’, with the notion of a ‘feedback loop’ in cognitive science. Then he goes on to argue for a convergence between this reinterpreted version of the ‘intentional arc’ and the non-representationalist theory of neural networks. Dreyfus suggests that neural-network theory and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of our basic bodily coping with the world can be claimed to stand in a relationship of mutual support in demonstrating the implausibility of representationalism. However, by arguing that ‘Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the representationalist accounts of our most basic and pervasive forms of learning and skillful action are mistaken and require a different account’ can be ‘defended not
Dreyfus suggests that Merleau-Ponty philosophical claims are straightforwardly subject to empirical correction. Hence, he goes on to suggest that:

… we must supplement Merleau-Ponty's account of the ‘I can’ with a scientific theory of how the body – conceived objectivistically as an ‘actual body-structure’ – conditions competence and cognition.

The general rationale behind Dreyfus’ move here is rooted in the way that a cognitive sciences approach views the intrinsic limitations of a purely phenomenological approach. Dreyfus suggests this in his discussion of how Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach may be said to leave him without a convincing account through which to understand the reciprocal process characteristic of skilled behaviour: how ‘past experience is projected back into the perceptual world of the learner and shows up as affordances or solicitations to further action’. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls the dialectical process of progressive development and refinement of perceptual and motor capacities, and his phenomenology identifies it as a central feature of embodied perception. However, suggests Dreyfus, from the phenomenological perspective Merleau-Ponty is left to marvel at the ‘magical’ nature of the perception-action feedback loop. This is because Merleau-Ponty denies, in principle, that a neuroscientific approach is fundamental to a properly philosophical account of the complex phenomena of skill acquisition without

---

presenting a detailed alternative account. Dreyfus is referring here to Merleau-
Ponty’s claim that ‘for the normal person his projects polarize the world, bringing
magically to view a host of signs which guide action …’48 The suggestion is that the
way acquired skills are projected back into our phenomenal field in terms of
capacities for action or affordances can only be described by Merleau-Ponty as the
phenomenal field being reconstituted, ‘being reorganized’ by a ‘ … law unknown to
the subject’49. Thus, Merleau-Ponty uses the term ‘magic’ to evoke the idea that this
process is in no sense reliant on any act of the subject; rather, it is a structure of
perceptual experience that simply passively occurs and, as such, is
phenomenologically available for description as simply ‘magically’ occurring.

However from the fact that Merleau-Ponty does not provide an account of
skill acquisition in Phenomenology of Perception, it does not follow that such an
account is not possible from a phenomenological perspective. And Merleau-Ponty
himself would certainly argue that the outline of such an account is to be found in the
Phenomenology. The important point for our concerns, however, is that Dreyfus
implies that a neurobiological account might be the appropriate place to supplement
Merleau-Ponty’s incomplete phenomenological account, rather than just further
phenomenological exploration of the issue. But, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty
would reject Dreyfus’ suggestion on the grounds that he has illicitly scientised
Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. His move of translating the concept ‘intentional
arc’ into the concept ‘feedback loop’ is carried out on the grounds of a deeper
translation that takes place without argumentation, yet it is the philosophical ground

48 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.129 (italics added).
49 Ibid. p.225.
that makes the former translation possible. This deeper translation is the essence of the scientising move and consists of ‘de-transcendentalising’ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position in order to read it as a phenomenological psychology. That is, a phenomenological approach that understands phenomenological studies as forming part of the science of psychology. This is an empirical science about ‘the nature of the psyche’ … a science about psychical life understood as a real occurrent entity in the natural world.\(^{50}\) On Merleau-Ponty’s view phenomenological psychology, like any science, is philosophically ‘naïve’ because it simply takes its subject matter for granted. Rather than asking fundamental questions about how experience and scientific theorising are possible, as philosophical phenomenology does, it simply presupposes objectivism and realism in its attempts to understand consciousness on the model of objects and their causal relations. Reconstructing Merleau-Ponty’s view in these terms essentially turns it into different position. It is no longer a transcendental philosophical position resting on the phenomenological reduction and using phenomenology in the service of existential ontology, where the terms ‘body-subject’ as ‘being-in-the-world’ are understood to express \textit{a priori} structures of being. Instead it is a phenomenological psychological reconstruction that understands Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological claims as claims about the structure and content of embodied perceptual experience within the natural attitude and, thus, of the same order as claims made in the natural science of psychology. And given that they are reconstructed as claims about the cognitive experience of ‘the mind’ or ‘psyche’, in the sense that this term is traditionally used in ‘philosophy of mind’, it follows that

these claims can be deployed in the service of either the confirmation or disconfirmation of theories in the cognitive sciences.

Perhaps the best way to read Dreyfus here, I would contend, is as arguing that a cognitive scientific perspective, if it is to progress beyond its present point, needs to learn from Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment in order to avoid incoherence on its own terms. Basically, the idea would be that any and all representationalist approaches to perception necessarily fail and that connectionism at least avoids this non-start. And, given the centrality of skill acquisition to a theory of consciousness, it might fruitfully explore this area using Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions as a plausibility test for its theoretical models. This, of course, makes it an argument firmly within the epistemic framework of cognitive science.

Dreyfus’ critique of Merleau-Ponty’s marvelling at the ‘magical’ nature of lived experience is certainly interesting within that framework, and may have implications that can spur a Merleau-Pontian to a clarification of their views. Nevertheless, he has radically modified Merleau-Ponty for the purposes of a potential rapprochement with scientistic naturalism. The key move that allows him to claim Merleau-Ponty for this purpose is his translation of the concept of the ‘intentional arc’ in terms of that of a ‘feedback loop’. He justifies this by referring to a statement in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work, The Structure of Behaviour, where Merleau-Ponty asserts the ‘dialectical’ nature of the relationship between organism
and environment in the following way: ‘the relations between the organism and its milieu are not relations of linear causality but of circular causality’\textsuperscript{51}.

As Justin Tauber correctly argues in connection with this:

The translation from ‘circular causality’ to ‘feedback loop’ is certainly a lot less problematic than it would be from ‘intentional arc’… However, it isn't clear that Merleau-Ponty would himself endorse the equation of the meaning of ‘intentional arc’ and ‘circular causality’ given that, prior to introducing the former phrase in the \textit{Phenomenology}, he writes that ‘reciprocal action’ is as yet only a compromise with causal thought, and a contradictory principle\textsuperscript{52}.

So there is an important modification being undertaken with respect to the role of causal explanation in Dreyfus’ account. But this is a modification that, as we have seen, goes against Merleau-Ponty’s view, which holds that such causal explanation is \textit{philosophically} ill conceived because it fails to grasp how it is derivative from the more basic level of lived experience. So when Dreyfus asserts that ‘the neural-net model thus suggests a nonrepresentational, and yet non-magical, brain basis of the intentional arc\textsuperscript{53}, he is asserting a possibility that Merleau-Ponty explicitly rules out in principle. And he does this on the grounds of his ‘scientisation’ of Merleau-Ponty’s position.

\textsuperscript{51} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, p.15.
Shaun Gallagher’s tacit ‘scientisation’ of Merleau-Ponty follows the same pattern. Gallagher reads Merleau-Ponty as addressing the issue of ‘bodily systems that operate on a subpersonal, automatic level’\textsuperscript{54}. Like Dreyfus, Gallagher argues that Merleau-Ponty’s extension of the concept of intentionality to include the motor intentionality of the bodily subject must inevitably run up against the limitations of the phenomenological method. Arguing that the role of the body schema is ‘impenetrable to phenomenological reflection’, he concludes that it ought to be ‘worked out conceptually with the help of the empirical sciences’\textsuperscript{55}. On Gallagher’s conception the primary goal is to argue for embodiment as the central theme for cognitive science. As in Dreyfus, Merleau-Ponty’s views are seen as being straightforwardly subject to empirical correction as the result of a tacit scientisation that reconstructs Merleau-Ponty as a phenomenological psychologist. And so, as a result of this reconstruction, Gallagher can claim that empirical research can produce evidence that, in supporting Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of lived experience, also demonstrates a convergence between the two bodies of theory.

Like Dreyfus, Gallagher also looks to \textit{The Structure of Behaviour} as the reference point for his appropriation of Merleau-Ponty for an embodied cognitive science. For example, Gallagher emphasises Merleau-Ponty’s claim that there is ‘a truth to be found in naturalism that is lost in a purely transcendental approach’\textsuperscript{56}. However, Gallagher, whilst advancing no sustained defence of his reconstruction, offers suggestions as to what this defence might look like. It involves implying that


\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.} p.232. For Merleau-Ponty’s discussion see: Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, pp.201-221.
The Structure of Behaviour and Phenomenology of Perception consist of basically the same ‘kinds of investigations’\(^57\). This view is taken to be illustrated by the fact that:

… although he did not engage in scientific experiments, he took contemporary empirical studies seriously and used science in an interdisciplinary fashion, to motivate his phenomenological investigations.\(^58\)

So given the importance of empirical studies in motivating his phenomenology Gallagher argues that:

If we understand cognitive science in the very general sense of an interdisciplinary scientific enterprise that attempts to explain cognition, where cognition is defined to include not simply higher-order thought, but such things as perception and emotion, then Merleau-Ponty was certainly involved in that kind of enterprise\(^59\).

Apart from the contestable claims regarding the content of Merleau-Ponty’s first two books, this way of putting the issue is not defensible. For it is certainly true to say that Merleau-Ponty ‘used science in an interdisciplinary fashion, to motivate his phenomenological investigations’. It is thus true that he was involved in a sort of inter-disciplinary cognitive scientific enterprise before the fact\(^60\). But Gallagher

---


\(^{58}\) Ibid. p.208.

\(^{59}\) Ibid. p.207.

\(^{60}\) He also held the Chair of Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne from 1949 to 1952.
implies that Merleau-Ponty took this involvement with the sciences as being continuous with his works understood explicitly as ‘works of philosophy’. But this is a misunderstanding because Merleau-Ponty’s purpose in using empirical research is always to draw the reader’s attention to phenomena that can, and ought to be, re-described from the phenomenological point of view. This is because it is only from this perspective that its true philosophical significance can be grasped.

This point can be made clear if we look at the case study that Merleau-Ponty discusses at greatest length in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that of the aphasic ‘Schneider’ who suffered from a brain injury as the result of being struck by a shell splinter during the First World War. The Schneider case is complex but a basic sketch of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis will suffice for my present point. Schneider can comfortably perform complex habitual concrete movements, such as those involved in making and mending clothes, but is unable to perform any ‘abstract’ movements, like pointing his arm in a specified direction or locating unseen points of contact on his body. Schneider is also unable, for example, to engage in play-acting.

Despite the fact that he has retained his capacity for perception and habitual movement, he has lost of a sense of the range of possible movements that are normally available to us. Merleau-Ponty argues that this indicates that although he has retained a sense of his ‘phenomenal body’, his loss of the ability for ‘abstract’ movement and play-acting indicate that he has lost the sense of his body as something objectively located in space and, as such, available for ‘gratuitous and free

---


62 Ibid. p.156.
spatial thought. The inability to orient himself in relation to the possible means that Schneider lacks the ability to ‘creatively reorganise the structure of [his] world and then retain this reorganised structure as a cultural “sediment” within [his] experience of the world’. But the point of going through the empirical material for Merleau-Ponty is always to draw the reader’s attention to a crucial philosophical point. Merleau-Ponty’s goal in discussing the detail of the impoverished world that Schneider experiences as a result of his disorder is to bring into relief, by contrast, our normal motor-intentional capacities. Again, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion is complex, but a key point of showing us the ‘levelling-down of the world’ that Schneider experiences is to illustrate the way that:

It is this existential basis of intelligence which is affected, much more than intelligence itself, for, as we have shown, Schneider’s general intelligence is intact … Beneath the intelligence as an anonymous function or a categorial process, a personal core has to be recognized, which is the patient’s being, his power of existing.

And Merleau-Ponty explicates ‘this existential basis of intelligence’ in the very words that Dreyfus quotes in his support of his connectionist proposal:

… the life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our

---

63 Ibid. p.119.
64 Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ p.16.
66 Ibid. p.155.
past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results from our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And it is this which ‘goes limp’ in [Schneider’s] illness.67

So Merleau-Ponty uses the Schneider case material with the express purpose of explicating his concept of motor-intentionality, our basic bodily intentionality, and thus to lay out an important foundation of his theory. As we have seen earlier in the chapter, Merleau-Ponty goes on to explicate the ontological dimension of this motor-intentionality as the existential structure being-in-the-world. So, even if Merleau-Ponty was in a sense involved in a kind of cognitive scientific enterprise before the fact, it is a serious misunderstanding of Phenomenology of Perception to read it as a work of phenomenological psychology rather than of phenomenological ontology. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty argues, a ‘work of philosophy’ takes up a critical attitude with respect to the sciences and aims to provide a ‘radical reflection’ on their very possibility.68 It does not simply presuppose the naturalistic attitude, unlike the cognitive sciences, which necessarily presuppose it.

What my exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy has helped to make clear is that, although their conception of the relationship between phenomenology and

67 Ibid. p.157.
68 Ibid. p.57.
69 The taking up of a critical attitude for Merleau-Ponty means that we refuse to simply take the subject matter ‘nature’ for granted. Instead, philosophical phenomenology takes up a transcendental perspective with respect to empirical experience and the scientific objective world that it purports to discover out there wholly independent of human enquirers. This perspective enables us to ask genuinely philosophical questions about the foundations of experience and scientific thinking. It investigates the very basis of this experience and this ‘knowledge’ and asks how it is possible.
cognitive science may differ in the details, Dreyfus, Gallagher and Roy et al. hold a
general view in common. That view rests on an implicit transposition of the
phenomenological claims in *Phenomenology of Perception*, which are explicitly
philosophical claims, into the claims of a phenomenological psychology that does
not take up a ‘critical’ attitude. So, however effective the lines of argument proposed
by Dreyfus, Gallagher and Roy et al. are when viewed as arguments against
representationalist approaches to perception within cognitive science, they
necessarily involve a tacit scientisation of Merleau-Ponty’s view – in diametrical
opposition to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical claims. This view, as we have seen,
argues powerfully against the objectivism presupposed in this kind of
‘naturalisation’, with its implicit ontological commitment to a realist conception of a
world of determinate objects standing in external causal relations with one another.
For the subject-object split that animates ‘objective’ and ‘causal’ thought – leading it
to assert that fundamentally we are physical objects with the property of
consciousness – is grounded by Merleau-Ponty in the existential body-world relation
revealed in pre-reflective perceptual experience. Thus, the body-world relation
expounded by Merleau-Ponty is taken to ontologically underpin, and hence provide
the theoretical ground for, the causal explanations proposed in the natural sciences,
including the cognitive sciences.

Gallagher claims that ‘the body schema must be worked out with the aid of
the empirical sciences’ in terms of ‘bodily systems that operate on a subpersonal,
automatic level’. Dreyfus claims that ‘we must supplement Merleau-Ponty's account
of the ‘I can’ with a scientific theory of how the body – conceived objectivistically as
an ‘actual body-structure’ – conditions competence and cognition’. However, it is
Merleau-Ponty’s view that what makes such theorising possible is the fact that we are fundamentally an irreducible body-subject. As a body-subject we are not susceptible to explanation in terms of an objectivist ontology of a determinate being comprised of mutually exterior parts that make up a human organism who is located as another object in a world conceived of as a totality of objects.

It is a consequence of his conception of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty would argue, that it is impossible to appraise the theory of perception independently of the existentialism in which it is situated. Thus to assess his theory of perception is also to assess his ontology, because it is an ontological theory of perception through and through. For Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, perception involves a simultaneously intentional and ontological relation between perceiver and perceived, an intentional/ontological relation. For Merleau-Ponty, unlike the scientistic philosopher of mind, perception does not simply provide a compelling ‘clue’ as to the nature of the world; a nature that can only be worked out when the insufficiencies of perception are supplemented through the methodological and theoretical practices of the cognitive sciences and the critical rational analysis of the philosophy of mind. Rather, on Merleau-Ponty’s account, perception gives us direct unmediated access to emergent pre-objective being.

As with Dreyfus and Gallagher, Varela, Thomson and Rosch ‘scientise’ Merleau-Ponty in an ‘off-stage’ tacit manner, invoking his phenomenology in the name of a scientific project which is at odds with the main thrust of his philosophical convictions. On Merleau-Ponty’s account, far from evidencing a convergence between phenomenology and the cognitive sciences on the
terms of the objectivism that underpins those sciences, the results of phenomenological enquiry actively undermine the objectivism that informs the tacitly assumed ontology of the cognitive sciences. For example, when Varela, Thomson and Rosch claim that they seek to ‘open a space of possibilities in which the circulation between cognitive science and human experience can be fully appreciated’\(^{70}\), the space that is opened up is nevertheless circumscribed by a presupposed objectivism and realism.

Merleau-Ponty certainly does argue for a convergence between phenomenology and ‘the sciences of man’\(^{71}\) but his view of ‘convergence’ is definitely not that of the post-cognitivists. He argues for a fundamental difference between philosophical and scientific enquiry. On this view, the very results of a sustained methodological phenomenology will not simply serve the function of a critical compliment to neuroscience-based arguments against representationalism in perception. Instead, they show us that, in order to achieve a full understanding of the philosophical implications of the phenomenology of perceptual experience, we must take up a transcendental attitude with respect to that experience and attempt to grasp the ontological significance of the perceptual phenomena beyond realism and idealism. Rather than simply contributing to the stock of knowledge of the ‘sciences of man’ or serving alongside the facts of neuroscientific studies, as working towards the empirical confirmation of empirical theories within the naturalistic attitude, phenomenology must play a distinct role in overturning that attitude and undertaking a transcendental reflection that seeks to understand the very possibility of the

\(^{70}\) Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p.xviii.

\(^{71}\) See: Merleau-Ponty, ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’.
sciences – a ‘critical’ and ‘radical’ reflection following Merleau-Ponty’s existentialised version of a transcendental method. This method transforms the Kantian project of articulating the transcendental \textit{a priori} structures of experience into the existential project of articulating transcendental \textit{a priori} structures of being\textsuperscript{72}.

The tacit ‘scientisation’ performed by post-cognitivist theorists fails to grasp the depth of the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of objectivism, the way in which it reverberates throughout the entirety of the \textit{Phenomenology}. In their use of Merleau-Ponty for inspiration and guidance in their project of arguing for the importance of embodiment for cognitive science, they tacitly morph Merleau-Ponty’s view to fit within their objectivist framework and then claim Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as convergent with their project for an embodied cognitive science. This is clearly evidenced in Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s attribution of a ‘double sense’ conception of embodiment to Merleau-Ponty. They assert that ‘for Merleau-Ponty, as for us, embodiment has this double sense: it encompasses both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms\textsuperscript{73}.

To get Merleau-Ponty’s central and foundational concept – the lived body – wrong is a significant error. An error that misses Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the lived body as the ‘third term between the psychic and the physiological’\textsuperscript{74}, his

\textsuperscript{72} I will further explore the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{73} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’, p.xvi. cf: their talk of the ‘sensorimotor structure of the perceiver (the way in which the nervous system links sensory and motor surfaces)’: p.173.

\textsuperscript{74} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.140n.
nuanced phenomenologically grounded attempt to understand the uniqueness of the lived body as a ‘between the two’ (*entre-deux*). In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty makes clear his view that the project we now call cognitive science is fundamentally incapable of grasping consciousness, and inveighs against objectivist ‘cognitive scientists’ of his day for presupposing that it might. For example, he criticises the neuroscientists Adhemar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein in *Phenomenology of Perception* for presupposing objectivism, in a similar way to Varela, Thomson and Rosch in *The Embodied Mind*. Merleau-Ponty argues that in their discussion of Schneider and other case studies:

> Gelb and Goldstein … have never named this third term *between* the psychic and the physiological, between the ‘for itself’ and the ‘in itself’ to which their analyses always led them and which we call existence. Hence their earliest works often fall back on the traditional dichotomy of body and consciousness.\(^{75}\)

It is precisely this subject/object dichotomy that is replicated in the ‘double sense’ view suggested by Varela, Thompson and Rosch: ‘the body as a lived, experiential structure’ and ‘the body as the context … of cognitive mechanisms’.

Likewise, the Gestalt theorists – ‘the psychologists who practise the description of phenomena’ – are ‘not … aware of the philosophical implications of their method’\(^{76}\). As a result of this philosophical naïveté, they ultimately try to

---


\(^{76}\) *Ibid.* p.54.
explain ‘the … objects in the [phenomenal] field’ in terms of ‘causes of … perception’\textsuperscript{77}. This is because they are constrained by ‘the ideal’ of an ‘explanatory psychology’ that ‘betrays its own descriptions’ by taking ‘as given the determinate universe of science’ – placing ‘perceptual consciousness in the midst of a ready-made world’\textsuperscript{78}. It simply fails to question ‘the objective thinking of classical logic and philosophy’ and ‘the alleged self-evidence of realism’, and so fails to understand the need for a ‘phenomenological reduction’\textsuperscript{79}. As we have indicated, ‘realism’ is a philosophical position that ‘leave[s] consciousness and take[s] as given one of its results’\textsuperscript{80}. This leads it to make ‘the mistake objective thought’. However, ‘objective thought’, Merleau-Ponty argues, is fundamentally inadequate to the task of ontology:

Objective thought, as applied to the universe and not to phenomena, knows only alternative notions; starting from actual experience, it defines pure concepts which are mutually exclusive: the notion of \textit{extension}, which is that of an absolute externality of one part to another, and the notion of \textit{thought} which is that of a being wrapped up in himself; … the notion of \textit{cause} as a determining factor external to its effect, and that of \textit{reason} as a law of intrinsic constitution of the phenomenon.

And so, he continues:
… the perception of our own body and the perception of external things provide an example of non-positing consciousness, that is, of consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a logic lived through which cannot account for itself, and that of an immanent meaning which is not clear to itself and becomes fully aware of itself only through experiencing certain natural signs. These phenomena cannot be assimilated by objective thought, and that is why Gestalt psychology which, like all psychology, is imprisoned within the ‘self-evident truths’ of science and of the world, can choose only between reason and cause …

So the phenomena of lived perceptual experience that the post-cognitivists seek to explain ‘cannot be assimilated by objective thought’. Rather, it will be systematically occluded through the imposition of a categorial framework that is intrinsically incapable of capturing its inherently ambiguous structure, instead reducing it to fit within the predicative order of a syllogistic logic. By seeking to account for it in terms of a binaristic model of subject/object, interior/exterior and reason/cause it must inevitably ‘destroy the phenomena’.

An example of this ‘destroying of the phenomena’ can be seen in a fundamental problem that arises regarding the computational model at the core of the cognitive science program. Our phenomenological explorations, as Merleau-Ponty

---

81 Ibid. p.57.
82 Cognitive science is based on the analogy of the mind with the computer, where the mind is viewed as a computational information processing system. Believing this approach to have the potential to resolve problems of the mind/body relation, cognitive scientists seek to reveal facts about human functional and representational organisation. The model through which these facts are interpreted analogically assimilates mind to computer, for example by conceiving brain function in terms of complex parallel processing.
has shown, reveal that what we experience is not a ‘universe’ in the scientific sense but rather a ‘world’ in the phenomenological sense. That is, our lived experience is structured in terms of a ‘phenomenal field’ where there is, as G.B. Madison observes, ‘always a background that cannot be thematized except in terms of a further background’83. And given that our experience is necessarily structured this way, how could a scientific approach ever hope to render the indeterminacy of the background in a formalised way so as to make it conducive to computational modelling?

This challenge to the original program of cognitive science is precisely what is motivating the work of the post-cognitivists. However, in order for there to be such a thing as a computational model capable of capturing the way that humans actually do bodily perceive and act, a way would have to be found, as Dreyfus has pointed out, of treating ‘the broadest context or background as an object with its own set of preselected descriptive features’84. In other words, a way would have to be found of enframing the horizon. But, as we have seen, any such putative transformation of ‘the indefinite horizon of determinable indeterminacy’85 – the lived world – into a totality of determinate objects – the scientific ‘universe’ – destroys the phenomena that it is called to explain. So in presupposing that the background can be treated as an object and, hence, subjected to a determinate description, it instantiates the ‘mistake of objective thought’.

On Merleau-Ponty’s view, scientific enquiry plays a crucial role in helping bring to light and focus our attention on important features of the body and

83 G. B. Madison, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Deconstruction of Logocentrism’ in Merleau-Ponty Vivant, M. C. Dillon (ed.) p.132
perception through its systematic and rigorous methodology of ascertaining patterns using perceptions within the natural attitude to check one another. These empirical patterns, however, must be integrated into a fully and explicitly ontological theory of human being in order for their full significance to be grasped. Human beings cannot be adequately conceived as objects that have the property of consciousness because our body is not an object; it is that which gives us our openness to objects, and the world in which they appear. And it is the structure of the body that provides the contingent a priori body schema that structures our experience. Any ontological meaning that we can arrive at is fundamentally dependent for its appearance on this body schema. And so a scientific approach, no matter how conceived, must simply fail to do justice to consciousness because it presupposes an ontology that is incapable of accounting for the content and structure of lived experience.

It is only by taking a transcendental turn and problematising these assumptions that the true philosophical role of the empirical sciences can be made clear. For Merleau-Ponty this means resituating the empirical sciences within the existential ontological frame, whilst all the time preserving the critical and experimental functions of scientific thinking and research. The naturalisation of phenomenology program, he would say, simply sidesteps this fundamental issue when it tacitly assumes objectivism and phenomenology might be reconcilable within a research program, the meta-theoretical framework of which is ultimately set by objectivism.

My exploration of Merleau-Ponty’s use of phenomenological description in the context of an existential ontology has served to make his views on the prospects
of a ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ – for example, on the model suggested by Roy et al. – clear and unambiguous. He holds that such a project is fundamentally misguided due to its tacit acceptance of Cartesian assumptions about the nature of the world: the prejudice of determinate being, the mutual exteriority of ontological parts and the amenability of phenomenal experience to the predicative order of a syllogistic logic. Therefore, despite its attempts to incorporate versions of his insights into a science of consciousness – for example: the holism of the functioning of the organism; the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience; the embodied and ‘embedded’ nature of perception; and perception as ‘enacted’ by the organism – it will necessarily lose the phenomenon of consciousness that it seeks to explain. Fundamentally, he argues, it ‘can never be made comprehensible’ how ‘significance and intentionality could come to dwell in molecular edifices or masses of cells’.86

We now have a clear outline of Merleau-Ponty’s key theoretical commitments, and have established both that he would, and why he would, reject the claim that his phenomenology is conducive to the kind of scientisation recently advocated in the cognitive sciences (and in cognitive science-oriented philosophy of mind). With this, we can move on to a further exploration and clarification of his philosophical views via the criticism of recent misreadings of key aspects of his position. As I explained in the introductory chapter, the argumentative trajectory of the thesis consists of a three-step movement. I have now completed step one: my critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ question raised by the uses of Merleau-Ponty in ‘post-cognitivist’ cognitive science. We are now in a

position to go on to complete the second step: the question of the correct
interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position. I have already addressed
the issue of the correct interpretation of the phenomenological reduction via a
critique of some recent claims that have fallen short of an accurate account. I will
now go on to explore two key areas of his philosophy that are crucial to a proper
grasp of his position, yet have also been prone to misunderstandings in the recent
literature. The first (Chapter 3) is the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism,
and the second (Chapter 4) is his notion of an existential dialectics.
1. Introduction

Now that we have a picture of the central claims of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology, it is my goal to clarify two crucial aspects of his position that have been the source of recent confusion in the secondary literature: the themes of transcendentalism and dialectics. Neither of these themes is readily accessible to scientistic naturalists and both are viewed as contentious by them. This fact, coupled with the recent misreading of his views, indicates why it is important to clarify just what it is that Merleau-Ponty does with these concepts, and to highlight the ways in which recent authors have failed to interpret him correctly. My critique and ‘counter-reading’ on the issue of transcendentalism and dialectics in Merleau-Ponty is contained in the present chapter (transcendentalism) and in the following chapter (dialectics). As I mentioned in the Introduction, my critique of recent readings of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism and existential dialectics, coupled with my critique of recent readings of the phenomenological reduction (Chapter 1), constitutes the second step of the three-step argumentative trajectory of the thesis. This step is a critique of recent claims regarding Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method, transcendentalism and use of dialectics in the interest of establishing the correct interpretation of his position.

I will explore Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘existential dialectics’ in the following chapter. However, it is the task of the present chapter to draw out the
central implications of the set of moves that represent the transcendental dimension of his position in contrast to recent misreadings and in relation to the transcendental tradition. It is from this tradition that Merleau-Ponty appropriates the idea of a transcendental approach to philosophy, however his appropriation incorporates a substantial critique of his predecessors.

If someone were to ask whether it is appropriate to refer to Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental philosopher, the answer might seem fairly obvious given my discussion in the foregoing chapters. As we have seen, he discusses the transcendental dimension of his method explicitly, though not in great detail, in *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, the status of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position in *Phenomenology of Perception* has been the cause of debate in the reception of his work in the Anglophone world since its publication in translation in 1962. The implications of Merleau-Ponty’s claim to be ‘taking up a transcendental attitude’, and of the connected claim that his position is ‘beyond realism and idealism’, have come in for particular critical attention.

Throughout its reception it has often been claimed that Merleau-Ponty’s position represents a form of idealism. For example in 1967 in the initial phase of its reception, Marvin Farber characterised Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a ‘subjectivism’ that, suffering from ‘unclarified motives and rational processes’, draws on ‘idealistic tenets of a bygone generation’. This sentiment has recently been echoed by John Searle, who claims that Merleau-Ponty is ‘an idealist in a rather

---

traditional sense. On the issue of transcendentalism Thomas Baldwin is certainly right to assert that ‘it is no straightforward Kantian position that Merleau-Ponty affirms’. Yet his claim that Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental approach to philosophy ‘is not that of a ‘pure’ subject of consciousness; instead it is an idealism which gives a special status to the body as that for which there is a perceived world’ suggests that Merleau-Ponty is a kind of transcendental idealist in spite of himself. A related but more detailed version of Baldwin’s claim has been argued by Sebastian Gardner. The general claim is that in spite of his critique of ‘Kantianism’, Merleau-Ponty’s position comes out as a form of transcendental idealism that takes the perceptual processes of the lived body as the transcendental constituting condition for the possibility of experience.

Gardner argues that despite Merleau-Ponty’s provision of a profound critique of an ‘Intellectualist’ version of transcendental idealism, it is not clear that he is ‘entitled to claim that his position is in no sense an idealism and is in all senses beyond realism and idealism’, and that, in fact, it is a ‘new kind of transcendental idealism’. This is because despite Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on phenomenological description, his philosophy relies on a version of a Kantian ‘transcendental turn’, in order to make theoretical claims using ‘transcendental explanation and conditions’ in

---

3 Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p.5.
4 Ibid. p.6.
5 Vincent Descombes makes a similar claim in Descombes, Modern French Philosophy, p.76.
7 Ibid. p.17.
8 Ibid. p.16.
relation to a perceptual subject who is understood to play a ‘constitutive’ role in relation to the world of experience.

The claims of Gardner (and Baldwin) illustrate the potential difficulties we can encounter when trying to interpret the sense in which Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental philosopher. In addressing their specific claims, and the general issue that they concern, it will be useful to raise the following *prima facie* not unreasonable question on their behalf. That is, given that Merleau-Ponty develops out of the transcendental tradition and advocates a transcendental method, does his position, despite his critique of Kant and Husserl, nevertheless also come out as a form of transcendental idealism? Asking the question in this form will allow me to tease out the nature of his transcendentalism and its connection to his ontological position. It will thus help to accurately situate him, both in relation to the transcendental tradition, as well as in relation to scientistic naturalism.

In section 2 I discuss the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism. Following that I critically appraise the claim that, as Gardner puts it, Merleau-Ponty is ‘a new kind of transcendental idealist’. And finally, in section 4, I provide an analysis that complements our discussion in chapters 1 and 2 by pointing out the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analyses decisively undermine Intellectualist transcendental philosophy.
2. Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendentalism

I agree with Sebastian Gardner’s claim that ‘there is a defensible and exegetically significant sense in which Merleau-Ponty can be said to belong to the transcendental tradition’\(^9\). I do not, however, agree with the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty’s position is a ‘new kind of transcendental idealism’ and, therefore, I situate Merleau-Ponty within the tradition in a different way. Now to say that Merleau-Ponty is part of the transcendental tradition in philosophy is to claim that he is involved in a tradition that, although arising principally out of Kant’s work, consists in something much broader than that work and its most direct conceptual descendants (e.g. Neo-Kantianism). That there is a broad tradition of this kind is fairly obvious from the development of post-Kantian German idealism in Fichte, Schelling and Hegel’s attempts to reformulate the critical philosophy in terms of the spirit rather than the letter of Kant’s work. This broad characterisation is, in fact, the view that Merleau-Ponty himself takes of the transcendental tradition\(^10\). This broad conception of the tradition, as Gardner points out:

\[\text{… allows the claim that Merleau-Ponty belongs to the transcendental tradition to be squared with the fact that Kant is one of the principal targets of}\]

---

\(^9\) Ibid. p.23.
\(^10\) e.g. in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty compares versions of transcendentalism: ‘Husserl’s transcendental is not Kant’s’, p.xv.
the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and that Merleau-Ponty is opposed on many fronts to German idealism and neo-Kantianism\(^{11}\).

However, an immediate objection that might be raised against situating Merleau-Ponty within the transcendental tradition – even this broadly construed – is that his critique of the transcendental ego undermines the fundamental principle on which a transcendental approach to philosophy must rest. This fundamental principle, as we have seen, is present in both Kant (‘transcendental unity of apperception’) and Husserl (‘transcendental ego’). There is no pure reflecting subject in this sense – a subject whose rational self-reflective activity is understood to provide philosophical foundations – in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body-subject. Rather, he views the ‘*cogito*’ as secondary and derivative on the primary perceptual consciousness of a ‘tacit *cogito*’\(^{12}\). In order to see why this objection is well motivated, yet should not disqualify Merleau-Ponty from being classed as a transcendental philosopher, we need to define what it is for one to be a transcendental philosopher. The present discussion has talked of a tradition, but what is it that makes this way of philosophising distinct and thus worthy to be talked about as a tradition?

It was Kant who formulated the original program for a transcendental philosophy. The question that he sought to answer was epistemological in character.


\(^{12}\) e.g. ‘Behind the spoken *cogito*, the one which is converted into discourse and into essential truth, there lies a tacit *cogito*, myself experienced by myself’, and ‘…the tacit *cogito*, the presence of oneself to oneself, being no less than existence, is anterior to any philosophy…’ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.469, p.470.
In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he systematically sought an account of the conditions that made a particular type of rational knowledge possible. This knowledge he termed ‘synthetic *a priori* knowledge’ and it was transcendental in the sense that it ‘transcended’ what could be given to us in sense experience (synthetic *a posteriori*).

By undertaking his ‘Copernican turn’ – the building of a philosophy out of the view that objectivity is an achievement of subjectivity – his philosophy thus rested on a conception of a universal transcendental subject that brings the organising principles to the matter of sensuous experience. In doing this it provides them with their necessary form. On this account the subject is a metaphysical entity, though of a purely formal kind. That is, as the empirical subject that each of us takes ourselves to be we do not experience our transcendental subjectivity. Rather, we come to know of it via a process of (transcendental) deduction through which we establish its (transcendental) necessity for an adequate philosophical account of our experience.

Consistent with his phenomenological turn in transcendental philosophy, Husserl holds that via the method of the *epoché* and transcendental reduction we are able to experience our own transcendental subjectivity – which is now individuated as *ours*, and not just a purely formal principle as in Kant. For Husserl, transcendental subjectivity must be understood through a comprehensive phenomenological exploration of intentionality, and in relation to an essential (*eidetic*) analysis of the thus revealed and necessarily related intentional structures (*noetic* and *noematic*)\(^13\).

\(^13\) For Husserl, *eidetic* analysis is the phenomenologist’s procedure for ascertaining the ‘essence’ or ‘essential structure’ of a particular set of phenomena. It involves a methodical reduction to only the essential necessary elements that go into making those phenomena what they are. Husserl’s *eidetic*
An important distinction that we need to draw at this point, in order to make clear the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s position, is that between what we will call a methodological transcendentalism and a metaphysical transcendentalism. Metaphysical transcendentalism entails the positing of a transcendental entity (according to Merleau-Ponty, a ‘transcendental ego’ or ‘universal constituting consciousness’), as in the ‘Intellectualist’ approaches of Kant and Husserl. The constituting power of this transcendental entity is understood to necessitate, in Kant’s case, a form of transcendental idealism with respect to the cognitive status of objects and the world that we take to be empirically real. In Husserl’s approach it is supposed to necessitate a transcendental-phenomenological idealism with respect to the status of the being of intentional objects and of the phenomenal world in general.

A methodological transcendentalism, on the other hand, consists in transcendentalism with respect to philosophical method. That is, the theorist undertakes an ‘investigation of the a priori conditions of the possibility of experience’\(^\text{14}\), as Kant puts it, and makes substantive claims regarding those a priori conditions that involve an appeal to transcendental necessity in relation to a conception of the ‘subject’ that is not simply the empirical subject. In other words, they take transcendental forms of argument as integral to their methodology. Notice method relies on a procedure of ‘imaginative variation’, which consists of the imaginary addition and subtraction of the properties of an object or content in order to focus and isolate its essence. As Joel Smith describes it: ‘… by varying, in imagination, the features of an object, we will eventually come up against something that cannot be varied without destroying that object as an instance of its kind. It will be inconceivable that an object of that kind might lack a given feature and thus, taking inconceivability as a guide to impossibility, we will have seen that the feature in question is a part of the essence of objects of that kind’. Joel Smith, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction’, p.564.

\(^{14}\)Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A93/B126.
that ‘transcendental forms of argument’ is not equivalent to Kant’s ‘transcendental deduction’. Kant’s transcendental deduction is a form of transcendental argumentation used in the service of an epistemological project that inherits the terms of the problematic as outlined in Descartes’ project to refute the skeptic.

However in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological approach, Kant’s ‘investigation of the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience’ as a means to address the problem of knowledge substantially morphs. Whereas Kant sought to lay bare synthetic *a priori* knowledge and the nature of such knowledge, Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, seeks to uncover synthetic *a priori* structures of being. Following Heidegger, he rejects the restricted epistemological context of Kant’s transcendentalism, asserting that a transcendental methodology must be fully ontological in its philosophical scope. As Jeff Malpas and Steven Crowell have pointed out in relation to the Heideggerean ontological project:

> To understand transcendental philosophy essentially as an answer to a certain kind of skepticism (that is, as primarily an epistemological enterprise) is to remain within the Cartesian framework in which alone such a problem can arise.15

The stepping-stone that allows the existential project to be realised is Husserl’s phenomenological method, based as it is on the concept of intentionality.

The phenomenological concept of intentionality allows for a widening of the scope of the transcendental question precisely because it does away with the representationalist concept of intentionality that had animated early modern philosophers such as Kant. This conception holds that our intentional relation to objects is mediated by ‘mental representations’ of those objects. Whereas on an existential-phenomenological conception the subject is necessarily embodied and ‘in-the-world’, and objects are understood in the sense of intentional ‘noematic’ correlates that we encounter in and through our worldly context.

Thus, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, the transcendental question goes beyond Kant’s question regarding the conditions of cognitive experience to include the conditions of all intentional experience. As such, it is widened to include the conditions of possibility for even the minimal intelligibility of the most basic pre-predicative, pre-objective perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty does this, as we have seen, because phenomenological description reveals this pre-reflective intentionality as subtending all explicit acts of reflective judgement, and even all consciously directed acts of perception. As such, it is incumbent upon the transcendental philosopher to account for this aspect of our experience.

Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist conception of the body-subject as essentially being-in-the-world necessitates a different approach to transcendental philosophy than Kant’s Intellectualism, or Husserl’s inconsistent attempt at a reconciliation of the transcendental ego with his innovative phenomenological conception of intentionality. Merleau-Ponty’s novel approach has led to confusions as interpreters
have tried to make sense of the nature of his position, with some recent readers, as I mentioned, claiming that he is a new kind of transcendental idealist. However, given our exposition of the nature of his existentialism in relation to Kant and Husserl, coupled with our principled drawing of the distinction between metaphysical and methodological transcendentalism, the mistake being made by these various interpreters of Merleau-Ponty comes clearly into view. His existential phenomenology is not a transcendental idealism but rather is correctly interpreted as a form of methodological transcendentalism that eschews metaphysical transcendentalism. For, if we define a full-blown transcendental philosophical position as requiring both methodological and metaphysical transcendentalism – à la Kant and Husserl – then Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy does not qualify. However, there is no obstacle to asserting that Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental philosopher provided that we view him as a methodological and not a metaphysical transcendentalist. Let us substantiate this point.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy generally, and his arguments specifically, grow out of the transcendental tradition and are intimately bound up with the historical debates of that tradition. In spite of his view that reflective consciousness is secondary and derivative – and his accompanying rejection of metaphysical transcendentalism – we can argue, with Sebastian Gardner, that:

… his position and arguments are intelligible only in terms of the transcendental self-consciousness tradition against which he is reacting and to which he proposes a radical revision: his position is not independent of the
self-consciousness tradition in philosophy in the way that others, for example
the [scientistic] naturalists, are, since he takes from it the basic idea of
transcendental conditions …16

And it is this taking up of the ‘basic idea’ of transcendental conditions and of
transcendental theorising that displays his methodological continuity with the
tradition and simultaneously marks his distance from scientistic naturalism. What
makes Merleau-Ponty’s position wholly unique as a form of transcendental
philosophy, however, is his argument for what should occupy the most fundamental
transcendental role.

He is of the view that there are transcendental roles that need to be
filled if we are to provide an adequate philosophical account of human consciousness
and the world. However, he disagrees with his predecessors in the tradition as to the
nature of the occupants of these roles. As Gardner observes, the occupant of the most
fundamental transcendental role:

… is located not … in the objectivity of conceptuality, as per Hegel, but nor
is it located in subjectivity, as per Kant: it lies in something non-conceptual
with regard to which the subjective/objective distinction cannot be made
intelligibly, viz. perception conceived pre-objectively17.

---

17 Ibid.
This key thesis tethers his transcendentalism to an ontology that is ‘liberal naturalist’. This is because it consists in an argument for transcendental necessity that is built out of a phenomenological account of the primordial level underpinning natural attitude perception. For Merleau-Ponty the transcendental necessity refers back to pre-objective lived experience and emphatically not to a metaphysical ego that is transcendent to the world. And, given that for Merleau-Ponty transcendental philosophy is understood to be seeking transcendental \textit{a priori} structures of being, the body-subject who has this perceptual experience must be understood ontologically as ‘being-in-the-world’. Therefore, the transcendental structure that is revealed is the fundamental \textit{existential} structure of the primordial body-world relation. That this relation is a ‘lived’ relation does not affect its transcendental function in his argument. For it is precisely this lived pre-objective perception – understood ontologically as being-in-the-world – that Merleau-Ponty argues provides the transcendental condition of possibility for both natural attitude perception and for the theoretical claims of Empiricism and Intellectualism, the claims of objective thought. As a result of this view:

\[
\text{… Merleau-Ponty can be regarded as pursuing the post-Kantian search for subject-object identity, and as proposing that the relation of subject to object is grounded, not in an all-encompassing conceptually graspable whole, but in}
\]
the non-conceptual being which mediates the relation of the thinking subject to the objects of thought\textsuperscript{18}.

It is thus that the distinctive nature of his phenomenological ontology is made clear. His Heideggerean conception of the body-subject as an \textit{Ek-stase}, as always transcending itself towards a world in which it is necessarily entangled as \textit{being-in-the-world}, is the essence of his existentialism. And it is this concept that blocks the validity of any claims to the effect that he is an idealist. For, although his existential philosophy is in an important sense grounded in the experiencer, it definitely cannot be a subjective idealism of the Berkleian type – \textit{esse est percipi}\textsuperscript{19} – because the concept of intentionality, perception, the subject, indeed the entire Cartesian problematic that this position engages is roundly rejected. But neither is it a transcendental idealism of the Kantian type: the form is given to the content of sense experience via the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, which orders the ‘chaos’ of an ultimately incomprehensible world-in-itself into a knowable world of possible experience, via a combination of the forms of intuition and the categories of experience. Nor, on the other hand, is Merleau-Ponty’s view a version of Husserlian transcendental-phenomenological idealism. This view claims that the transcendental subject has ‘absolute being’ in relation to the ‘relative being of the world’, which is ultimately dependent on its constitutive powers\textsuperscript{20}. Merleau-Ponty lacks the kind of

---

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{19} G.J. Warnock (ed.), \textit{The Principles of Human Knowledge with Other Writings by George Berkeley} (London 1977), Part 3.
\textsuperscript{20} Husserl, \textit{Ideas I}, §§ 54-55.
transcendental *metaphysical* commitments that make the philosophies of Berkeley, Kant or Husserl ‘idealist’.

2.1 Transcendental Method in *Phenomenology of Perception*

As we saw in the previous two chapters, Merleau-Ponty conceives the phenomenology of pre-objective perception as having an intrinsically ontological import. That is, articulating the structure of pre-objective perception is the key to laying bare the structure of pre-objective being. And, in order to grasp this primordial dimension, it is necessary to undertake a transcendental turn. Before I look at the claims for this move in *Phenomenology of Perception* it is important to point out that the move had already been announced in *The Structure of Behaviour*. At the end of that book Merleau-Ponty calls for a philosophy that ‘inverts the natural movement of consciousness’ with the purpose of uncovering the ways in which the world is constituted in consciousness’. We need to do this, he claims, because ‘perception is not an event of nature’. As Thomas Baldwin argues:

This conclusion is of fundamental importance to Merleau-Ponty: perception, he holds, is so fundamental to our ways of making sense of the world that it cannot itself be just a fact within the world, and certainly not just ‘a fact of nature’ … perception cannot be a fact of nature precisely because it plays a

crucial role in constituting nature, since the forms, structures or laws that we find in nature are there only as aspects of a perceived world\textsuperscript{23}.

In claiming that ‘perception is not an event of nature’ Merleau-Ponty signals both his rejection of realism and the necessity of a transcendental turn. ‘Speaking generally’, he says, ‘… we are rejoicing the critical attitude’\textsuperscript{24}. So ‘the first conclusion that we have to draw from the preceding chapters’, he summates in \textit{Structure of Behaviour}, is that the analysis ‘leads … to the transcendental attitude’\textsuperscript{25}. However, as a foreshadowing of his future existentialism, he also says that we have to ‘redefine transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real’\textsuperscript{26}. So the only kind of transcendental philosophy that Merleau-Ponty can envision as viable is one where the ‘phenomenon of the real’ – as revealed through a phenomenology centred on the lived body – forces a ‘redefinition’, a reconceptualisation, of what it is that a transcendental approach to philosophy ought to consist in. That is, we take up a ‘transcendental attitude’ with respect to the phenomenal field, and the kind of transcendental \textit{a priori} structures that we seek to articulate are \textit{a priori} structures of being.

In \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} Merleau-Ponty makes clear that a transcendental turn is his intention, arguing that ‘the descriptive method can acquire

\textsuperscript{23} Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p.4. n.b. Baldwin’s phrase ‘perception is not a fact of nature’ is his translation of the phrase that is rendered ‘perception is not an event of nature’ in the original English translation.

\textsuperscript{24} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, p.206.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}. p.224.
Chapter 3: Merleau-Ponty as Transcendental Philosopher

a genuine claim only from the transcendental point of view. He lays out this part of his method in the concluding chapter of the Introduction, which is entitled ‘The Phenomenal Field’. In this chapter he argues that what we are faced with is the internal incoherence of Intellectualist and Empiricist accounts of perception, an incoherence that rests on the ‘mistake of objective thought’.

Merleau-Ponty holds that proceeding through an analysis of psychological theories of perception motivates us to take a transcendental approach. This is because the attempt to account for perception with the psychologist’s categories of ‘mind’ or ‘psyche’ and ‘body’ or ‘neural underpinnings’ inevitably leads to the ‘explanatory gap’ identified by contemporary cognitive science. But these attempts to capture the phenomenon of consciousness in a scientistic theory, as we saw, necessarily fall short because they ‘destroy’ the phenomena of our lived perceptual experience. Grasping the shortcomings of psychological accounts, argues Merleau-Ponty, allows ‘the true problem of constitution’ to come into view for us.

This is why, he argues, Phenomenology of Perception has to begin its examination of perception with a critical analysis of psychological theories. By examining the problems with these theories – basically their inability to account for the phenomena of perception – the need to undertake a ‘return to the phenomena’ is thereby motivated. Thus he argues:

27 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.8.
28 Ibid. p.73.
If we had not done so, we would not have understood the whole meaning of
the transcendental problem, since we would not, starting from the natural
attitude, have methodically followed the procedures which lead to it.\textsuperscript{29}

He sees it as part of the natural progression towards the correct transcendental
approach that the reader should become acquainted with the subject of ‘phenomena’
via an initial process of purely psychological description. Thus he argues that it is
necessary for us ‘… to frequent the phenomenal field and become acquainted,
through psychological descriptions, with the subject of phenomena …’\textsuperscript{30} This is
because by starting with the concrete phenomena we ‘… avoid placing ourselves
from the start, as does reflexive philosophy, in a transcendental dimension assumed
to be eternally given’, and so ‘missing the true problem of constitution’.\textsuperscript{31}

So ‘reflexive philosophy’ – Intellectualism – misses the ‘true problem of
constitution’ precisely because it pays insufficient attention to what our perceptual
experience is actually like – the way that objects and world are dynamically and
progressively constituted in relation to an active corporeal subject. As this statement
makes clear, Merleau-Ponty’s problem is with the conception of the transcendental
that posits mental faculties and processes that are taken to be universal to any
perceiving and rational creature. This ‘misses the true problem of constitution’
because it ignores the phenomena and the process of perception involved in our
uniquely human embodied experience, thus overlooking what is in fact the primary

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}
locus of constitution. Instead, it presupposes a disembodied ‘transcendental ego’ as the subject of experience, a ‘universal constituting consciousness’ without ‘thisness, location or body’\textsuperscript{32}.

If we follow the way in which the scientific approach to psychology necessitates a descriptive approach we are led to phenomenological psychology. Thus, we are introduced to the concept of the ‘phenomenal field’. But Merleau-Ponty does not stop here, as a scientistic naturalist thinker would have to. He argues, as we have seen, that this psychology needs to be ‘purged’ of its ‘psychologism’ in order to be turned into a properly philosophical method:

We could not begin, however, our psychological description without suggesting that once purged of all psychologism it can become a philosophical method. In order to revive perceptual experience buried under its own results, it would not have been enough to present descriptions of them which might possibly not have been understood, we had to establish by philosophical references and anticipations the point of view from which they might appear true. Thus we could begin neither without psychology nor with psychology alone\textsuperscript{33}.

And so he concludes with an invitation to the reader:

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.} p.xiii.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.} p.73.
… now that the phenomenal field has been sufficiently circumscribed, let us enter this ambiguous domain, with the expectation that the psychologist's self-scrutiny will lead us, by way of a second-order reflection, to the phenomenon of the phenomenon, and decisively transform the phenomenal field into a transcendental one.\textsuperscript{34}

So the ‘second-order’ reflection ‘transforms’ the field of the phenomena – the ‘world’ of lived experience with its various describable structures – into a transcendental field that is understood, as Taylor Carman puts it, as ‘a space of possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities constitutive of our perceptual world’.\textsuperscript{35}

From this vantage point contingent facts about perception are understood to presuppose the necessary, invariant structures of the phenomenal field. Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, articulates these through his concept of the ‘body schema’, which provides the necessary structure of our perceptual experience in terms of its intrinsically perspectival orientation in space and time, the figure/ground structure in object perception and the horizontal structure of the phenomenal field in general.

Merleau-Ponty understands himself to be critically reconceiving transcendental philosophy through philosophical reflection on concrete ‘psychological considerations’ that the Intellectualist transcendental philosophers have overlooked. As Sebastian Gardner points out, Merleau-Ponty views this reflection as disclosing:

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{35} Carman, \textit{Merleau-Ponty}, p.82.
… what moves are necessary in order to ascend from the natural attitude to the transcendental standpoint, thereby transforming our conception of that standpoint from its Intellectualist misconception36.

Merleau-Ponty views this as a more experientially grounded, and therefore justifiable, account of what the phenomenological reduction concretely involves. This concrete approach is in line with, and is an instantiation of, his existentialism.

As I argued in Chapter 1, performing the *epoché* is not simply an issue of the bracketing of a ‘thesis’; rather, the ‘psychologism’ of the natural attitude is in need of a ‘positive purgative operation’, as Gardner puts it37. Neither the truth of the philosophical conclusions that Merleau-Ponty argues for, nor our knowledge of them as truths, ultimately depends on the facts of psychology as the empirical psychologist understands them. This is why I argued in the previous chapter that Dreyfus, Gallagher and Roy et al. are mistaken when they imply that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account can be straightforwardly subject to empirical correction. The view that the philosophical import of Merleau-Ponty’s claims depends on the viability of the empirical accounts that he reinterprets is, in Alphonse de Waelhens’ words, ‘an absolute misreading’38.

Sebastian Gardner perceptively observes that Merleau-Ponty approved de Waelhens’ essay as the Introduction to *The Structure of Behaviour* because, on

---

Merleau-Ponty’s view, it is the role of psychology to allow us to arrive at a point from which we will be able to ‘grasp phenomenological truth independently of the scientific method’, on the basis of a primordial ‘relation to the pre-objective’\(^{39}\). It is Merleau-Ponty’s view that objectivist thinking is rooted in the natural process of perception, constituting objects and world in a movement that simultaneously occludes the process of perception in favour of the perceived (determinate objects)\(^{40}\).

Given this, ‘objectivism’ in the form of scientific theorising does not simply hold an accidental place \textit{vis-à-vis} phenomenological philosophy. Rather, because it is based on the natural movement of perception, it is a necessary and irremovable part of human thinking as it tries to conceptualise this experience. Thus Merleau-Ponty does not argue for its removal from our thinking, as for example Heidegger does; instead, he views it as performing a crucial constraining and guiding function with respect to phenomenological philosophy\(^{41}\). This is because if, as Merleau-Ponty urges, philosophy is to base the essential on the factual (in the phenomenological sense), then the factual (in the empirical sense) explorations of the special sciences can bring phenomena to light that will suggest reappraisals at the level of philosophical phenomenological theory. Psychology is the special science that has a special status with respect to phenomenological philosophy. This is because its research, for example the Gestalt psychologists’ work on the figure/ground structure in perception,  

\(^{40}\) ‘Human life is defined in terms of this power which it has of denying itself in objective thought, a power which stems from its primordial attachment to the world itself.’ Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.381.  
\(^{41}\) Despite his sustained critique of the realist concept of an ‘absolute object’ Merleau-Ponty holds that ‘a return to pre-science is not the goal. The reconquest of the \textit{Lebenswelt} is the reconquest of a \textit{dimension}, in which the objectifications of science themselves retain a meaning and are to be understood as \textit{true’}. Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p.182.
functions to focus phenomenological analyses onto important concrete phenomena that a phenomenological philosophy ought to be able to account for. Thus Merleau-Ponty says:

Phenomenology could never have come about ... prior to the construction of science. It measures the divergence between our experience and this science. How could it ignore it? How could it precede it?⁴²

To sum up: Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the transforming of the phenomenal field into a transcendental one in order to make phenomenology properly philosophical, is clearly a version of a transcendental methodology. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘existentialising’ of transcendental philosophy results in a unique position because he develops a transcendental approach through a discussion of the status of the body and perception. His methodological transcendentalism, therefore, stands in sharp contrast to the Intellectualist conception of transcendental philosophy, which is *metaphysical* as well as methodological.

2. Merleau-Ponty as Transcendental Idealist: A Critical Analysis

Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, was adamant that his position was not a form of idealism and that, in fact, his phenomenological ontology gets us beyond the

realism/idealism contest because it rejects the Cartesian epistemological framework in which that contest is played out. In the previous section I asked the question as to whether Merleau-Ponty’s adoption of a ‘transcendental attitude’ meant that his position would inevitably end up as a form of idealism. Pointing out the contrast between his existentialist conception of transcendental philosophy and the Intellectualist one, I argued that his position is a methodological but not a metaphysical form of transcendentalism. That is, it manages to avoid the idealism that was intrinsic to Kant and Husserl by rejecting their positing of a metaphysical entity, the transcendental ego. In order to further substantiate this point I will now look at some recent claims that Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental idealist, pointing out how and why they misinterpret his position. This will help to further clarify the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, its distance from transcendental idealism, and thus indicate why the temptation to read Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental idealist is fundamentally misguided.

Sebastian Gardner has argued that despite Merleau-Ponty’s provision of a profound critique of Intellectualist transcendentalism, it is not clear that he is ‘entitled to claim that his position is in no sense an idealism and is in all senses beyond realism and idealism’\(^\text{43}\). In fact, it is a ‘new kind of transcendental idealism’\(^\text{44}\). Gardner focuses our attention on Merleau-Ponty’s belief that any theoretical claims that we make about perception and the world can be true only in so


\(^{44}\) cf. Thomas Baldwin’s claim that Merleau-Ponty’s transcendentalism ‘is not that of a ‘pure’ subject of consciousness; instead it is an idealism which gives a special status to the body as that for which there is a perceived world’. Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, p.6.
far as they are able to accurately capture the structure of pre-predicative, pre-objective lived experience. Given his attempt to consistently follow through on a phenomenological approach, Merleau-Ponty holds that any claims to philosophical knowledge necessarily rest on the pre-objective, the perceived world. And it is through the giving of ‘a philosophical status’ to our pre-objective experience that we will be able to solve persistent philosophical problems (for example, the problem of skepticism and knowledge, the mind/body problem and the problem of the mind/world relation). On Merleau-Ponty’s account these problems are not to be solved simply via discursive solutions. Rather, in referring them back to their basis in lived experience we can advance solutions via, as Gardner puts it, ‘a strategy of dissolution’ that shows how they in fact arise due to the intrinsic structure and limitations of rational thought.

Gardner observes that Merleau-Ponty’s strategy is:

… a novel development of Kant's argument that transcendental idealism is uniquely capable of resolving philosophical problems which are otherwise insoluble.\(^4\)

In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception Gardner points out several important respects in which Merleau-Ponty’s position derives from Kant’s. The first is the way in which Merleau-Ponty employs a version of the strategy of argument that Kant uses in the Antinomy of Pure Reason. This is the strategy whereby Kant

addresses four topics in traditional metaphysics and argues that they each have a set of two opposing metaphysical theses that contradict each other, and yet which can both be shown to be arrived at through valid arguments. For example:

1. the thesis that the world is *infinite* in space and time and its contrary the thesis that the world is *finite* in space and time, and

2. the thesis that causality is in accordance with the laws of nature and freedom. And its contrary: ‘there is no freedom; everything in the world takes place solely in accordance with the laws of nature’\(^{46}\).

Kant argues that the antinomies instantiate a general form of theoretical conflict between the positions of empiricism and Rationalism. Kant’s strategy of resolving this conflict is to identify a proposition in each antinomy that is presupposed by both of the contradictory claims, and to then go on to deny this proposition. The denial of this shared presupposition then serves to eliminate the contradiction. What his antinomies have in common, Kant argues, is that when we ask ‘what is the presupposition that they all share?’ we find that they all assume that the ‘objects of our knowledge are things in themselves’. So, by pointing out that the contradictions are generated due to adhering to this key claim of transcendental realism, an indirect proof of transcendental idealism has thereby been presented, as it manages to avoid these irresolvable contradictions. In eliminating this shared presupposition regarding the nature of objects of knowledge, philosophy can proceed

---

to produce a theory of knowledge that grounds the sciences whilst it simultaneously articulates the limits of reason. The principle methodological vehicle for this is the taking of a transcendental turn that views objectivity as an achievement of the subject – Kant’s ‘Copernican turn in philosophy’.

Gardner draws our attention to the following passage from Merleau-Ponty as an indication of his use of a Kantian Antinomy strategy:

It is true that we arrive at contradictions when we describe the perceived world. And it is also true that if there were such a thing as a non-contradictory thought, it would exclude the whole of perception as simple appearance. But the question is precisely to know whether there is such a thing as logically coherent thought or thought in the pure state. This is the question Kant asked himself… One of Kant's discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being47.

In relation to this passage, Gardner points out that Merleau-Ponty is centrally concerned with the fact that when we attempt to describe the perceived world a basic contradiction arises. This contradiction concerns the relation of the subject to the world and is expressed by Merleau-Ponty in terms of ‘the contradiction of

immanence and transcendence. This refers to the contradiction that arises as a result of the fact that the objects of perception are both immanent in acts of perception while also being transcendent to them. In seeing an object, what we see is never the whole or complete object; rather, we always see a given side ('profile') of the object. Thus, despite the seen side of the object being immanent to our act of perception, the unseen sides are transcendent. So the object is necessarily both immanent to, and transcendent of, our perception as constitutive of what it is to ‘see an object’. Thus Merleau-Ponty says that the ‘perceived thing itself is paradoxical’. Likewise, he says that ‘the perceived world is paradoxical’ because this same structure of transcendence in immanence applies to the perceived world in general: the perceived world is only immanent to a perceiver because it is simultaneously transcendent to them.

Gardner argues that:

… just as Kant shows in the Antinomy that contradictions can be avoided only if we deny identity between the given empirical world and the world qua an object of reason, so the *Phenomenology of Perception* shows that we must similarly deny identity between the perceived world and the world as conceived in objective thought. Kant's argument is meant to establish that the given empirical world is a realm of mere appearances; in Merleau-Ponty,
what is supposed to be shown is, by contrast, that the perceived world is a realm of pre-objective being\(^{50}\).

And so he concludes that although:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the conclusions drawn are opposed – because pre-objective being specifically lacks the conceptual constitution of Kantian appearance – \textit{the form and idealistic trajectory of the two arguments are the same}. In both cases there is an attempt to demonstrate a lack of fit between what is given in experience and what is represented by our concepts\ldots \(^{51}\)
\end{quote}

Gardner draws out two implications from Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy argument. The first is that the argument is ‘taken to show that the objects of our experience lack the subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing, i.e. to show idealism\(^{52}\). And secondly, ‘it is taken to entail a limitation or demotion of the power of thought: in Kant, the conclusion drawn is that pure reason cannot grasp nature, and in Merleau-Ponty, that the perceived world eludes the objectification of thought\(^{53}\). Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s strategy results in:

\begin{quote}
\ldots a new kind of transcendental idealism \ldots which not only denies that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but
\end{quote}

\(^{50}\) Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.16.
\(^{51}\) Ibid. p.16 (italics added).
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
also affirms that the perceived world owes its reality exclusively to the intuitive component of cognition\(^{54}\).

Merleau-Ponty asserts that ‘the opposition of realism and idealism’ being ‘an antinomy of objective thought’\(^{55}\) is a problem that we ‘leave behind’ upon grasping that ‘the solution of all problems of transcendence’ can be found ‘in the thickness of the pre-objective present’\(^{56}\). That is, in understanding the fundamental role of temporality from an existential-phenomenological perspective. The ‘thickness of the pre-objective present’ refers to the phenomenological view that an objectivist conception of time as a series of abstract ‘now-points’ presupposes the lived experience of time that is constituted by the retention of an intended past and the anticipation of a projected future. Thus the phenomenological present is ‘thick’ because it denies the possibility of a ‘pure’ self-contained present as an abstraction of objective thought, and puts in its place the idea that we live a temporality that we do not constitute but rather which constitutes itself through us. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

> ‘In’ my present, if I grasp it while it is still living and with all that it implies, there is an ek-stase towards the future and towards the past which reveals the dimensions of time not as conflicting, but as inseparable … Subjectivity is

\(^{54}\) Ibid.


\(^{56}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.503.
not in time, because it Takes up or lives time, and merges with the cohesion of a life.\(^{57}\)

So the process by which a body-subject as a transcendence towards a world – an ‘Ekstase’ in Heidegger’s sense – is in a primordial process of co-constitution that is expressed by the ontological category ‘being-in-the-world’, is a fundamentally temporal process that is made possible through the primordial temporality that it ‘takes up or lives’. This stands in sharp contrast to the idea of the body-subject being in some sense ‘in’ time, implying an abstract separation of objective time from ‘the subject’ who exists ‘in’ time. This understanding presents us with another example of the way that the categories of objective thought are inadequate to the task of grasping pre-objective perceptual experience.

But Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist ‘solution’, says Gardner, is not genuinely ‘beyond realism and idealism’. This is because despite his critique of Intellectualism, he still retains a subject-centred and transcendental approach, where perception is not ‘a fact of nature’ and therefore must be theorised using ‘transcendental explanation and conditions’. Further, given his Kantian perspectival conception of the transcendental (that is, any transcendental claims that he makes are always relativised to, and constrained by, the situated experience of a lived body-subject\(^{58}\)),

---


\(^{58}\) For example, he characterises the philosophical problem of understanding the nature of visual perception as that of understanding ‘how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective’. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.78. As Gardner observes: ‘vision must be relativised to something that is not a point in the world, that could itself become an object of vision or be located in objective, geometrically determined space, but that is nevertheless somewhere’, i.e. that has the perspectival character of a point.’ Gardner, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception’, p.20.
Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy only entitles him to the claim that his position ‘subsumes the realism/idealism opposition in a restricted sense’ – a sense that results in the re-creation of idealism at another level. Gardner argues that Merleau-Ponty’s claim that perception is not ‘a fact of nature’ but is that through which we experience facts of nature, coupled with his antinomy strategy designed to show that the perceived world is our mode of access to pre-objective being, entails ‘a transcendental idealism of pre-objective being’. Let us assess these claims.

My basic contention is that, although Gardner’s reading of Merleau-Ponty is very perceptive, and that Gardner’s reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Kant are for the most part illuminating, the ‘idealism’ part of the term ‘transcendental idealism’ is not justified here. And our discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s position and his critique of Intellectualism should indicate why. Gardner’s use of that term rests on his claim about Merleau-Ponty’s retention of a broadly Kantian subject-centred, antinomial and transcendental approach. However it misses an important point about the way in which these are retained in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. Although Merleau-Ponty retains a transcendental methodology, in a phenomenologically restricted sense, he repudiates the transcendental metaphysics of the reflecting subject that underpins transcendental idealism. In relation to the claim

60 Ibid. p.17. cf. Thomas Baldwin’s view. Merleau-Ponty’s retention of a subject-centred and transcendental approach attempts to work out a unique version of an idealist position ‘that does not detach the subject of perception altogether from the world and thereby end up treating the world and his own body merely as objects for consciousness’ as Intellectualist transcendental idealism does. His attempt to characterise his existential phenomenology as a ‘synthesis’ that ‘transcends’ the opposition between the unsatisfactory positions of Empiricism and Intellectualism is not actually a genuine synthesis: ‘There is no question that Merleau-Ponty’s position is in fact a good deal closer to intellectualism than empiricism’. And this is because ‘the intellectualist and the existential phenomenologist’ are at base ‘both idealists’. Baldwin, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ p.13.
that it is the pre-objective perceptual processes of the lived body that play the role of transcendental subject, Gardner is definitely identifying the locus of Merleau-Ponty’s key transcendental move. However, in emphasising the Kantian dimensions of his position, Gardner loses sight of the way in which ‘the subject’ undergoes a radical reconception in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. For example, when he makes statements such as: it is ‘therefore as if Merleau-Ponty had applied to the faculty of understanding the strategy of argument which Kant applies to the faculty of reason, and subjected Kant's idealism to the sort of critique to which Kant subjects transcendental realism’, he implies that the term ‘pre-objective perceptual processes of the lived body’ could be taken to simply slot into an otherwise relatively intact Kantian framework, replacing the term ‘transcendental ego’.

This is very misleading because it implicitly characterises his notion of the perceptual body-subject as being-in-the-world as being broadly congruous with the rest of the Kantian framework. But this is not the case. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty repudiates the metaphysical notion of the subject as in any sense transcendent to the world (transcendental ego), as well as the Kantian Intellectualist account of perception modeled on judgement. So, given his critique of transcendental idealist metaphysics, coupled with his phenomenological conception of the body-subject as being-in-the-world, the claim that ‘the objects of our experience’ lack the ‘subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing’ cannot be adequate for the claim of transcendental idealism. Failing to recognise the full significance of what Merleau-Ponty takes existentialism to mean, Gardner mistakenly interprets its
anti-realism and its transcendental methodology as signifying transcendental idealism.

When Gardner claims, in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy, that ‘the objects of our experience’ lacking the ‘subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing’ shows ‘idealism’\textsuperscript{61}, he is interpreting Merleau-Ponty through the lens of a Kantian framework that Merleau-Ponty rejects. In order to make this clear we need to ask the question as to what it means to call a philosophical position an ‘idealism’. In the modern period the notion of idealism is connected to a representationalist theory of perception. This theory holds that the content of our perceptions are mere representations of the objects that we perceive. Kant’s theory of perception retained this empiricist notion holding that what are brought under the categories of the understanding in an act of outer perception are representations (\textit{Vorstellungen})\textsuperscript{62}.

An idealism, therefore, involves something more than a simple denial of realism, an assertion that the objects of our experience lack subject-independence. This is anti-realism and anti-realism does not entail idealism. The term ‘idealist’ itself is connected to the ‘way of ideas’ initiated by the philosophy of Descartes and taken up in the early modern tradition. The contents of the mind, on this account, are ‘ideas’ (simple and complex) and it is through these that we have access to reality, argue empiricists like John Locke\textsuperscript{63}. But idealists such as George Berkeley argue

\textsuperscript{61} Gardner, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception’, p.16.
\textsuperscript{62} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B34/A20.
instead that it is actually these ideas that truly exist, and not some mind-independent material reality underpinning them. Thus, on his account, ‘to be is to be perceived’. It is due to the conception of ‘ideas’ operative in ‘the way of ideas’ – shared by empiricists and Rationalists alike – that it makes sense to label Berkeley’s denial of Locke’s thesis of a mind-independent reality ‘idealism’.

Kant, for his part, called this ‘empirical idealism’ and understood himself to have refuted it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The position he advanced in its stead he called ‘transcendental idealism’. The Cartesian notion of the pure subject, a version of the representationalist view of perception (where representations are brought under the categories) and the epistemological problematic that it engages are the vital ingredients that make Kant’s philosophy a transcendental *idealism*. For it is in attempting to resolve this problematic that he introduces his transcendental methodology.

Additionally, the notion of the transcendental ego is crucial here because it is via the *a priori* categories of the understanding that this self-subsistent reflecting entity brings sensible intuitions (i.e. what is given in perception) under concepts in acts of judgement about the experienced world. Thus, his idealism is idealist because it holds that we cannot know the things in themselves but rather only that which can become an object of experience. And something becomes an object of experience by being brought under the *a priori* forms of intuition and *the categories* of the understanding – cognitive structures of a transcendental subject that give form to the matter of experience. What we know are appearances. So here, as with Berkeley, it is the ideal – the *a priori* cognitive structures – that is playing an essential role in
giving form to the world that we experience and can potentially know; this is precisely why Merleau-Ponty refers to it as *Intellectualism*.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty rejects Kant’s Intellectualist theory of perception, his Intellectualist conception of the subject and the epistemological problematic of Kant’s transcendental approach to philosophy. That is, Kant’s attempt to answer the skeptic via a philosophical justification of *scientific knowledge* that he grounds in a transcendental ego. Merleau-Ponty powerfully critiques Kant’s misconception of perception on the model of an act of judgement. He uses the phenomenological concept of intentionality in order to demonstrate the way that perception is not an act of judgement but rather is a pre-reflective openness to the world that provides the background against which any explicit act of judgement stands out. Merleau-Ponty’s subject is not a self-transparent subject of reason, the cognitive structure of which provides the eternal conditions of possibility for the truths of empirical sciences in a trans-historical set of categories. Rather, his subject is a lived ‘body-subject’ that is opaque to itself, concretely culturally and historically situated, not an object but a lived process of transcendence towards a world. And thus it is simultaneously engaged in a ‘co-constitution’ of the phenomenological perceived world — or, ontologically, *being-in-the-world*.

Kant’s notion of the subject and of perception modeled on an act of judgement involving representation is nowhere to be seen. And it follows from this that the epistemological problem of knowledge that underpins Kant’s transcendental idealism is not what motivates Merleau-Ponty’s existentialism. If the subject is not separate from the world but rather is necessarily primordially and intentionally
related to it, and only comes to know itself via bodily participation with the world, as an ‘Ek-stase’, a subject-for-a-world, then the problem does not arise. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: ‘we must not … wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive’\textsuperscript{64}. Thus, to call Merleau-Ponty a transcendental idealist in a sufficiently similar sense of the term as it applies to Kant is a mistake. He does not have the right conception of ‘subject’, ‘objects’ and ‘the world’, and of the relations between them, to justify this usage.

So when Gardner and Baldwin talk of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental idealist they fail to grasp the full dimension that the term ‘existentialism’ has for Merleau-Ponty. When Gardner says that Merleau-Ponty’s position is a ‘transcendental idealism’ that ‘not only denies that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but also affirms that the perceived world owes its reality exclusively to the intuitive component of cognition’\textsuperscript{65}, there is an interpretation problem at work. Although Gardner’s analysis is very helpful in teasing out the kind of moves that Merleau-Ponty is making \textit{vis-à-vis} Kant, he is doing it in a way that at times interprets Merleau-Ponty’s view through the notion of Kantian faculties, such as ‘intuition’, which have no place in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Thus, he tends to distort Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological-existentialist claims making him appear to be closer to Kant than he is by reconstructing his claims in a Kantian language rather than in the existential-phenomenological idiom in which Merleau-Ponty expresses them.

\textsuperscript{64} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xviii.

\textsuperscript{65} Gardner, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception’, p.16.
And if, in response, it is argued that the term is intended to draw attention to the fact of a ‘subject-dependence’ of ‘objects’ and ‘the world’ in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as well as the transcendentalism in his method, it might be suggested that this could be more accurately captured by the neologism ‘transcendental perceptualism’. However, the problem with this is that it is also misleading because it suggests that a direct contrast with Intellectualist transcendental idealism is appropriate. However, given that Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological concept of perception is so different from the Kantian one – based on ‘objective thought’, which presupposes the ‘prejudice of determinate being’– this will likely just serve to compound the confusion. This is because if Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a ‘transcendental perceptualism’, it is so in the context of an existential ontology that seeks to articulate a priori structures of being (existential structures) – a project fundamentally at odds with a transcendental idealism that seeks to justify knowledge in the face of radical scepticism. Surely then the claim about ‘subject-dependence’ is more accurately characterised by the term anti-realism. The term ‘transcendental anti-realism’ is more accurate still, as it captures Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of realism coupled with his transcendental methodology. This distinct theoretical space between realism and transcendental idealism is understood by Merleau-Ponty to be occupied by existential phenomenology.
3. Why Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Analyses Decisively Undermine Intellectualist Transcendental Philosophy

Given the combined discussion of the preceding chapters and the present one it would seem plausible to hold the view that the consistent application of ‘the principle of evidence’ – the stipulation that all theoretical constructions be grounded by phenomenological evidence – undermines the coherence of transcendental philosophy as conceived by Kant and Husserl. This is because the more detailed and concrete the experiential analyses become, the less plausible is an ‘Intellectualist’ epistemology and metaphysics. We have seen this in the case of the transcendental ego in relation to embodiment and perception. So if there is a place for a transcendental approach to philosophy then it seems that Merleau-Ponty is uniquely positioned to fulfil the tradition’s promise. And it is his existentialism, with its concretised, perspectival conception of the transcendental that presents ‘critical’ philosophy in its most viable form.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty believed that the course he had taken was an inevitable development growing out of the problems that developed in Husserl’s ‘phenomenological turn’ within Kantian philosophy. As part of Husserl’s bid to bring transcendental philosophy to full fruition he argues that it is vital to do detailed phenomenological analyses of the constitutive acts of consciousness. This is for Husserl the appropriate way to provide a ground – via the ‘principle of evidence’ – for the theory of transcendental subjectivity. The problem with this for the Husserlian version of transcendental philosophy is that attentive phenomenological analyses,
both in Husserl’s late work, and as these are elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, turn out to actively undermine its explicit epistemological and metaphysical claims and goals, thus rendering it a failure on its own terms.

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is as a result of the contradictions embodied in Husserl’s own work – between the statement of his method in *Ideas I* as being bound up with an idealist metaphysics, and the results of phenomenological studies into the nature of perception, embodiment and the lifeworld – that Merleau-Ponty takes phenomenological philosophy in an existentialist direction. Merleau-Ponty critiques Kant and Husserl as ‘Intellectualists’ who have inadequate accounts of perception, embodiment, and subjectivity (i.e., ones that fail to account for the relevant phenomenology). This phenomenologically based critique appears to irretrievably undermine the Intellectualist conception of transcendental philosophy. This is because, even if one disagrees with Merleau-Ponty’s positive ontological claims, agreement with the central arguments of his phenomenology of perception, embodiment and the perceived world as they do their work against ‘Intellectualism’, is enough to show that the Intellectualist conception, in being unable to accommodate this phenomenological material, cannot be the correct version of a transcendental approach to philosophy. And this is indeed what we have seen Merleau-Ponty argue, to powerful effect.

Though scientistic naturalists may find his view that perception\(^{66}\), the body\(^{67}\), objects\(^{68}\), the world and reason\(^{69}\) are fundamentally ‘mysterious’ unsettling, Merleau-
Ponty has a systematic rationale for this view. This rationale grows out of his deep engagement with Kantian and Husserlian transcendental idealism. Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in his efforts to do justice to the kind of phenomena that Kantian philosophy was not designed to accommodate as a result of its level of abstract generality. For example, with respect to the issue of perception this abstract generality was evident in Kant’s lack of interest in even the question of the relationship between different types of ‘perceptual apparatuses’, such as those of humans and animals. Instead, his claim is the general one that an experiencing subject must have some faculty of ‘sensible intuition’.

Husserl, in bringing the phenomenological detail into the picture via his principle of evidence, in effect opens the Kantian philosophy up to a kind of testing of its claims whereby phenomenologists can explore the central concept of ‘constitution’ (as well as of ‘transcendental subjectivity’ ‘objects of experience’ and ‘Copernican revolution’) in detail in a myriad of actual concrete acts of constitution. As a result of this ongoing ‘testing’ we see, following Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Intellectualism, that there is nothing to phenomenologically justify either the Kantian or Husserlian conception of the transcendental ego. Nonetheless, despite his strong critique Merleau-Ponty still holds that it is entirely appropriate that we take up a ‘transcendental attitude’ in order to engage in a transcendental essential (eidetic)

---

67 Ibid. p146.
68 Ibid. p.271, p.388.
69 Ibid. p xxiii.
70 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A15/B29.
analysis of the ‘existential structures’ of our lived experience as they are made manifest through the ‘phenomenal field’\textsuperscript{71}.

What this transcendental reflection uncovers is not the ‘Intellectualist’ subject that is a pure ego that is transcendent to the world. As we have seen, it reveals the body-subject and its active motor-intentional connection to the perceived world. The transcendental significance of his account of motor-intentionality is, therefore, that it reveals to us the body’s role in the constitution of the perceived world. And by revealing the reciprocity of the perceiver-perceived, body-world relation, it uncovers the fundamental ontological structure being-in-the-world. Thus, there can be nothing to justify the Husserlian attempt at a method of ascertaining ‘apodictic’ universal essences in the ‘pure’ consciousness of transcendental subjectivity because, as Merleau-Ponty argues, we are irreducibly worldly beings. What this means is that we are intrinsically ‘rooted’ in the world via our embodiment, as a ‘worlded-subject’ or ‘subject-for-a-world’, and that our body plays a vital role in the constitution of the perceived world. This is the reason behind Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of the ontological term ‘body-subject’, and the appropriation of his other key ontological term which describes the kind of existential-dialectical relational being that the body-

\textsuperscript{71} Merleau-Ponty talks of ‘the essence of … the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.388) the ‘essence of perception’ (\textit{Ibid.} p.xviii), the ‘essence of consciousness’ (\textit{Ibid.} p.67) and the ‘essence of the object’ (\textit{Ibid.} p.151). On his account, the ‘essence’ claims that phenomenology advances are grounded in the structure of the pre-objective level that underpins all of our meaningful experience. And so an account of the ‘essential structure’ of the pre-objective level is crucial because he understands linguistic meaning as derivative from a more basic lived perceptual meaning. Therefore, any claims as to essential structure – attained through a procedure of ‘\textit{eidetic variation}’ resting on phenomenological description – are underwritten by the world as primordially experienced. \textit{Ibid.} p.xvii.
subject shares with the world in which it finds itself: ‘being-in-the-world’\textsuperscript{72}. The Husserlian goal of attaining ‘apodictic’ universal essences from the transcendental standpoint is simply unachievable. This is because, as we have seen, perceptual experience is intrinsically perspectival due to the fact that it is necessarily situated. That is, perception inheres in a concrete situation that is opaque (never fully graspmable) and ambiguous (inherently amenable to multiple interpretation).

Consequently, we can never be sure of having intuited the phenomena on which \textit{eidetic} analysis is based with the requisite clarity and distinctness.

There is a further implication that can be drawn with respect to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the constitution of intentional objects as a bodily constitution through motor-intentional relations with the world: a ‘co-constitution’ between body and world. That is, there is no justification for ‘Intellectualism’ in that it represents the privileging of the standpoint of reflection in general, and in particular with reference to the constitution of things, the world, others, space and time. If Merleau-Ponty is right then there is no place for a conception of transcendental subjectivity of either the Kantian or Husserlian variety. This is because for Merleau-Ponty the subject is demonstrated to be both \textit{necessarily} embodied and \textit{necessarily} world-related. As such no sharp distinction can be made between ‘subject’ and ‘world’.

Therefore there cannot be the kind of ‘purity’ – the kind of transcendent subjectivity – that Husserl requires for his account to work. There is a pre-reflective intentionality that subtends all explicit thinking. It is only opaquely accessible to the reflecting

\textsuperscript{72} I will be exploring what Merleau-Ponty means by ‘existential-dialectics’ in the following chapter.
subject who takes up a transcendental attitude. As such, it is pre-reflective, pre-objective being that provides the transcendental condition for ordinary natural attitude perception and thought.

I think that Merleau-Ponty indeed makes the logical moves here in the context of attempting to make good on the project of a consistently phenomenological and transcendental philosophy. His critique of Kant and Husserl in this respect is a substantial philosophical achievement. Merleau-Ponty follows the phenomenological turn consistently through in a way that Husserl fails to do. Arguably, he works out the intrinsic logic of this move in such a way that leaves respondents in the tradition no option but to either follow him or to deny phenomenology the status of legitimate heir to the Kantian tradition. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s assessment of Intellectualism and his better-grounded use of a transcendental approach to philosophy, in terms of his ‘existentialising’ of the transcendental, makes it hard to see how the Kantian or Husserlian versions of ‘critical’ philosophy could possibly be recovered.

However, despite this powerful critique it is, as we have seen, essential to Merleau-Ponty’s program to give a defence of the role of a transcendental methodology in the articulation of a phenomenological ontology. Thus in relation to

73 Indeed the huge impact of Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s existential turn in eclipsing both the realist tradition and the non-metaphysical practice of phenomenological description following Husserlian method is testimony to this fact. For a sympathetic treatment see: Elizabeth A. Behnke, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Ontological Reading of Constitution in Phénoménologie de la Perception’ in Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl, Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (eds.). And for an unsympathetic one see: Kevin Mulligan, ‘Searle, Derrida, and the Ends of Phenomenology’, in John Searle, Barry Smith (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
the issue of naturalism, and of how he intends to persuade scientific naturalists of
the incoherence of their scientism and the viability of his alternative, Merleau-Ponty
offers the ‘Empiricist’ a method through which to grasp both the significance of the
phenomena and the necessity of a transcendental methodology. He does this via his
use of a large amount of empirical studies, mostly in the area of psychology and
neuroscience. These studies are invoked heuristically as a tool through which to
illustrate the significance of his existential phenomenology for resolving questions
that scientism is unable to. Merleau-Ponty uses cases from neuropathology in order
to throw into relief abilities that are easily taken for granted in normal functioning
people, such as the case of the aphasic Schneider, discussed in the previous chapter.
As we saw, the purpose of discussing these cases is to demonstrate the philosophical
significance of an otherwise psychological account of motor-intentionality. Thus the
pre-reflective motor-intentional perceived world becomes ‘being-in-the-world’: the
phenomenological structure of a basic type of experience is taken to indicate a
transcendental a priori structure of being.

It seems clear that we ought to understand Husserl as attempting to make
good on Kant’s troubled project by a more accurate phenomenologically grounded
account of constitution via his principle of evidence. By extension, we should view
Merleau-Ponty as attempting to make good on Husserl’s troubled project by working
out the details of the relationship between the natural attitude of everyday life and
science, and of the transcendental-phenomenological attitude, by linking them

74 Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Schneider is staged in Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of
Perception, Part 1: chapters 3 and 5
75 He argues for this explicitly in Husserl, ‘Kant and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy’.
together in the fully embodied, socially and historically situated subject. Moreover, by so doing, Merleau-Ponty provides a more phenomenologically accurate account of perceptual constitution than Husserl’s. As we have seen, this is a move that undermines Husserl’s Intellectualist conception of the phenomenological reduction. The upshot of this move, it might be argued, is that Merleau-Ponty, through his deep commitment to the phenomenological principle of evidence, uses that principle against Husserl to damaging effect.

4. Conclusion

My discussion of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental philosopher has illustrated the way in which his is an original existentialist position that uses a transcendental methodology. My discussion of his critique of Kant and Husserl and his scaled down use of transcendental theorising has served to mark out his distance from their transcendental idealism. In using the ‘principle of evidence’ against Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues that his phenomenology of perception shows something that Husserl, due to his ‘Intellectualist’ bias, could not see. This is the epistemological primacy of pre-objective embodied perception, the complex, ambiguous nature of this perceptual experience, and the basic role of bodily perception in the co-constitution of the meaningful world that we experience. This phenomenologically based realisation helps us to grasp the inseparable and intricate connection between subjectivity and embodied action. And, as a direct result of this, it serves to severely constrain the kind of account of transcendental subjectivity that
can be formulated in this new context. This is because Merleau-Ponty has blocked Husserl’s ‘Intellectualist’ move, which emphasises ‘the properly philosophical task of universal constitution’ for which the return to the lifeworld is understood to be a ‘preparatory step’. Thus, his critique stands as a refutation of the claim that a transcendental phenomenology might realise the Kantian ‘critical’ project in anything like its Husserlian form. And, as I have argued, Merleau-Ponty makes this move precisely as a result of his commitment to the very principle of phenomenology – the principle of evidence.

On Merleau-Ponty’s conception the ‘transcendental subject’ is a ‘body-subject’ of always world-directed and historically and socially situated lived experience. As a result, the kinds of claims that he thinks the transcendental philosopher can make are very limited when viewed in contrast to Husserl’s expansive conception of philosophy as a universal and rigorous science. In contrast to Husserl, his scaled-down and reformed conception of transcendental subjectivity sticks closer to the phenomena of bodily experience. An example of this is his ‘retreat’ to making claims regarding the transcendental conditions underpinning the lived experience of the body subject in terms of his a priori ‘body schema’. In line with Merleau-Ponty’s declared goal to ‘redefine transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real’, he locates a reconstructed version of transcendental subjectivity in the pre-objective perceived world, which the ‘body-subject’ co-constitutes.

76 Merleau-Ponty ‘The Philosopher and Sociology’, p.110.
77 Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behaviour, p.224.
It has been an important goal of this chapter to combat the tendency to bring Merleau-Ponty too close to Kant by misreading the significance of his transcendental method for his existentialist ontology. My critique of Gardner and Baldwin’s claim that Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental idealist, combined with my clarificatory exegesis, has explicated the uniqueness of Merleau-Ponty’s position in relation to other key figures in the tradition. The nature of this uniqueness, namely that Merleau-Ponty’s position is a liberal naturalism that nevertheless utilises a transcendental method, means that the kind of challenge that he represents to scientistic naturalism is likewise unique. This is because, unlike Kant or Husserl, he is deeply sympathetic with the naturalistic view – traditionally empiricist – that the body is the subject of perception. On the other hand he boldly rejects the ‘objectivist thinking’ characteristic of the scientistic mindset that has dominated naturalism since the early modern period.

Before moving on to a critical appraisal of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception, which is the subject of the final chapter, I will analyse another key aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s theory that is prone to misunderstanding. This is the theme of dialectics. In the following chapter I will explore Merleau-Ponty’s concept of an ‘existential dialectics’ and subject some recent interpretations to critical analysis. This key theme further marks his difference from Kant and Husserl, as well from scientistic forms of naturalism. As my critique of the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental idealist has shown, one cannot be clear about how Merleau-Ponty understands his existential phenomenology without an understanding of the nature of his transcendentalism. However, without a grasp of his unique
attempt to combine Heideggerean existential ontology with Hegelian dialectics one would also fail to grasp the full originality of his position. Thus, it is important to discuss Merleau-Ponty’s concept of an ‘existential dialectics’ in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Merleau-Ponty and Dialectics

1. Introduction

While Husserl had a relatively low opinion of Hegel and, as I have indicated, took his philosophical cues from Kant, Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, saw Hegel as providing a model for the conception of rationality and meaning that must underpin the existentialist response to the set of problems bequeathed by Husserlian phenomenology. In this chapter I will extend my picture of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology through an exploration of the influence of Hegelian thought on his conception of rationality and meaning, and on the existential categories that he formulates via that conception. This exploration is necessary because, although the fact that Merleau-Ponty has a dialectical approach is discussed in recent Anglophone literature, it is never explicitly clarified how his regular and varying usages of the term hang together. This dimension of his thought is often discussed only briefly, and some authors explicate his position without mentioning it at all.

If we look at the uses of the term ‘dialectic’ in *Phenomenology of Perception* we cannot but be struck by the fact that Merleau-Ponty gives the concept very wide

---

1 The main influence on Merleau-Ponty here was the interpretation of the humanised Hegel presented in the work of Jean Hyppolite’s influential *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979). Merleau-Ponty also attended Alexandre Kojève’s multi-year course and had close personal contact with Kojève. See: Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, p.548.

application. This is because his conception of reason and meaning dovetails with his desire to be responsive to what he comes to understand as the ontological ambiguity in its variety of phenomenological manifestations. Given that Merleau-Ponty himself does not provide an explicit discussion of his appropriation and use of dialectics, a reconstruction of the rationale of that appropriation will help to make clear both what his conception amounts to, and why recent scholars in the Anglophone tradition have failed to grasp the full significance of his conception of an ‘existential dialectics’.

Taking Merleau-Ponty’s references to Hegel and dialectics in *Phenomenology of Perception* seriously is fraught with interpretative difficulties. For, like Merleau-Ponty’s other appropriated terms (e.g. ‘phenomenological reduction’, ‘transcendental’), the term ‘dialectics’ is substantially reconfigured in the process of its importation into an ‘existential dialectics’. This conception is all too easily misunderstood if the language of dialectics that he uses is interpreted through the lens of its traditional meaning in Hegelian phenomenology, and not properly situated in the framework of his existential phenomenology.

Many recent interpreters of Merleau-Ponty struggle to articulate the way in which he incorporates the concept of dialectics into existential phenomenology. Taylor Carman, for example, points out the way in which Merleau-Ponty uses a distinctive and general strategy of argument, ‘a deliberately nonadversarial dialectical strategy’\(^3\). However, he doesn’t tell us whether this general strategy of argument applies uniformly across the board or just in certain areas of Merleau-Ponty’s theory. Carman discusses Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a dialectic

---

\(^3\) Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p.27.
operative at the level of culture and history without saying whether or how his
general dialectical strategy of argument links up with his claims about the dialectical
structure of historical experience. And there is no mention of the relation between
Merleau-Ponty’s usage and Hegel’s usage.

Dermot Moran asserts that Merleau-Ponty’s position:

… may be described as dialectical in that he sees the relations between
humans and the world as so intertwined as if by a kind of ‘pre-established
harmony’. The world’s colours proclaim themselves to our visual systems;
space reveals itself through our bodily gestures and our desire to traverse
distances. Traditional science and philosophy have not adequately managed
to describe the nature of this interaction or ‘intertwining’ between body and
world …

Moran is talking here of a dialectic between body and world that expresses the way
in which humans and the world are intricately ‘intertwined’. But, like Carman, he
does not specify what Merleau-Ponty means by dialectic in any detail, or its relation
with Hegel’s usage.

Hubert Dreyfus, in his discussion of the learning of skilled behaviour that we
explored in earlier chapters, discusses a related sense of dialectic. In this discussion
he emphasises the ‘feedback structure’ by which ‘past experience is projected back
into the perceptual world of the learner and shows up as affordances or solicitations

---

4 Ibid. p.171.
to further action”⁶. In connection to this he argues, using Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, that this process rests on a ‘dialectic of milieu and action’⁷. So there is a dialectic operating at the level of perceptual subject and environment that structures the perceived world. But, again, there is no explicit discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s usage, or its relation with Hegel usage.

One author that does attempt to grasp Merleau-Ponty’s notion of dialectics in more detail is Stephen Priest. Priest undertakes several interesting discussions around Merleau-Ponty’s use of Hegelian themes but doesn’t quite manage to present a coherent statement as to how Merleau-Ponty understands his use of dialectics to be reconciled with his existential ontology. When explicating certain key Merleau-Pontian ideas Priest, for example, offers his reader a dual reading: a ‘quasi Heideggerean’ interpretation and a ‘quasi Hegelian’ interpretation⁸. John Russon, on the other hand, takes a different tack asserting that ‘Phenomenology of Perception can … with equal legitimacy, be called a book of Hegelian or Husserlian (or, for that matter, Heideggerean) phenomenology’⁹. This suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s use of dialectics is essentially in accord with Hegel’s. Given these not immediately cohering views, it might be reasonable to be sceptical as to whether a coherent picture of Merleau-Ponty’s account is possible. As such, I intend to give an account of Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the term in order to sort out the type of view that he is arguing for.

---

⁷ Ibid. Merleau-Ponty quote from Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.129.
⁸ Priest, Merleau-Ponty, p.49.
Many naturalists will be unsympathetic with the use of dialectics within a naturalist philosophy. However, given:

1. my analysis of the shortcomings of the ‘Gardner-Baldwin’ thesis that Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental idealist;

2. Merleau-Ponty’s repeated references to Hegel and to dialectics; and

3. the fact that dialectics are not part of either the Heideggerean existentialism or Husserlian phenomenology from which Merleau-Ponty draws so much;

the question as to just what Merleau-Ponty does with the idea of dialectics presses itself upon us. In providing an explicit interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s conception I will show how dialectics is crucial to his view, how he understands the integration to occur, and why recent scholarship has failed to grasp how dialectics and existentialism come together in his concept of ‘existential dialectics’.

This will further serve to clarify the relationship between his position and the idealism of the transcendental idealist tradition, as well as the realism of the scientistic naturalist tradition. The critique of recent scholars will also enable me to complete the second step of my three-step argument: the critique of recent authors’ accounts of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction, transcendentalism and existential dialectics. So, in the interest of deepening and clarifying our understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position, let us turn to an examination of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Hegel and his conception of an existential dialectics.
2. Dialectics Necessitated by the Ambiguity of the Phenomena

Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, argues that metaphysics is tied up with ‘objectivist’ thinking, and that the proper task of philosophy is to attempt to formulate a phenomenological ontology beyond ‘objectivist’ and ‘logicist’ metaphysics. As we have seen, perceptual ambiguity and indeterminacy provides Merleau-Ponty with a general model for ontology. Merleau-Ponty asserts that ontological ambiguity – that being is ultimately intrinsically ambiguous – is what is responsible for the general form of the traditional problems of philosophy with their seeming irresolvability, as disputants inevitably divide along the lines of Empiricism and Intellectualism. The antinomial form that this entails is the result of attempting to conceptualise an ambiguous being that is fundamentally resistant to, hence always exceeds, the determinate categories of ‘logicist’ and ‘objectivist’ thought. As Sebastian Gardner puts it:

… in so far as we seek to take the ambiguity up in judgement, we find ourselves in contradiction. This ultimately real, unanalysable ambiguity is brute but not unintelligible, for we can make it intelligible either by recapturing the relevant pre-objective intuition, or by 'living' the ambiguity.\(^{10}\)

It is the task of the philosopher, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, to attempt to articulate the nature of pre-objective experience in order to articulate an account of being as it is

revealed to us through our lived body as primordial openness on the world. And it is here that the rationale for his importation of dialectics presents itself.

Gardner, with his tendency to read Merleau-Ponty through Kant, offers us a good way into the issue of dialectics. Gardner goes a long way towards making sense of Merleau-Ponty’s position but ultimately fails to grasp the dialectic dimension of his thought. In his account Gardner argues that Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy in *Phenomenology of Perception* ‘parallels’ Kant in his ‘mode of solution of philosophical problems’\(^\text{11}\). By this he means to point out that Merleau-Ponty follows the Kantian strategy of seeking the solution (or dissolution) of the central and persistent problems of philosophy by viewing them as a product not of the objects of experience but rather of the intrinsic limitation of human conceptual capacities. This allows us to understand the most fundamental of contradictions as being a product of the inappropriate use of our rational faculties. In the case of Kant these contradictions arise in the context of the ‘cosmological’ problems of traditional metaphysics. Kant pointed out that in speculative cosmology – thought about the world as a whole – there are four contradictory pairs of propositions, consisting of a thesis and antithesis, where each member of the pair has compelling reasons that we should accept it as true. For example: the proposition that the world has a beginning in time and is spatially limited and its contrary, that it does not; or that every composite substance consists of simple substances and its contrary, that every composite substance does not consist of simple substances. Kant argues that these traditional metaphysical questions fall outside the scope of possible knowledge for us

and that therefore it is an inappropriate use of our rational faculties to presume to be able to answer them.

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, takes Kant ‘a step further and applies ‘Kant's own strategy to Kant himself’\(^{12}\). In Merleau-Ponty’s hands it is not simply the ‘cosmological’ problems of traditional metaphysics to which the strategy applies. Rather:

\[\ldots\text{all of the problems of epistemology and metaphysics, including those that the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} claims to solve, disappear in the light of the discovery of pre-objective being }\ldots\]^{13}

The claim that they ‘disappear’ is too strong, but they certainly are radically recast as problems that arise relative to a certain metatheoretical framework and its inherent problematic. Gardner sums up Merleau-Ponty’s strategy in the following way:

Expressed in general terms, Merleau-Ponty's mode of solution to philosophical problems is, therefore, to reduce them to representations (albeit necessary ones) produced by objective thought in its confrontation with pre-objective being. All that remains of those problems, after this fact has been grasped, is the recognition that there is in reality, i.e. in pre-objective being, an irresolvable ‘ambiguity’\(^{14}\).  

\(^{12}\) \textit{Ibid.}\(^{13}\) \textit{Ibid.}\(^{14}\) \textit{Ibid.}
The use of ‘representations’ here is perhaps a little too Kantian but the general idea is right. Merleau-Ponty holds that the problems are generated as a function of objective thought and the epistemological problematic it necessarily generates as it tries to come to terms with our lived experience of pre-objective being. This problematic is dissolved via the phenomenological account of the structure of pre-objective being, which objective thought ‘represses’. What is revealed through this account is a deep and ‘irresolvable ambiguity’ that pervades all levels of our experience.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty holds that this ambiguity can be seen fundamentally in our experience of the *lived body*. For example, the body is lived by me as being ambiguous between ‘subject’ and ‘object’. ‘Subjective’ in the way that I phenomenally experience my body as I live through it and yet ‘objective’ in the way I can observe and touch it like an object in the world. This basic ambiguity pervades the perceived world in general. Merleau-Ponty asserts, for example, that ‘the visual field is that strange zone in which contradictory notions jostle each other’\(^{15}\), a ‘zone’ in which we encounter ‘the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon’\(^{16}\). To illustrate this Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the Muller-Lyer lines:

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{    } \\
\text{    } \\
\text{    } \\
\end{array} \]

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{    } \\
\text{    } \\
\text{    } \\
\end{array} \]

\(^{15}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.6.

He argues that ‘the two straight lines in Muller-Lyer’s optical illusion are neither of equal nor unequal length’; and ‘it is only in the objective world’ that the ‘question arises’ as to what their determinate length really is. This is because if we attend to our perceptual experience of them we find that, prior to any act of judgment, we perceive them as being ambiguously indeterminate between the claim that they are of equal length and that they are of different lengths. We perceive them as being both, in a way that is not correctable by perceiving them ‘more truly’, by going beneath the ambiguity to an unambiguous Cartesian clarity and distinctness that reveals what they determinately really are. For Merleau-Ponty they really are this ambiguity.

This ambiguity also pervades language, in the sense that language is ambiguously both an ‘external’ social structure that is not of the subject’s making and into which the body-subject is ‘born’. Yet it is simultaneously the immediate expression of ‘subjective’ thought and experience, and only exists in as much as it is ‘taken up’ by each subject in a process of creative expression that transforms the structure in the very act of utilising it. History is likewise also ambiguously objective and subjective because events of the past come to be understood only through particular human interpretations, and these interpretations of past events go on to influence future events. Merleau-Ponty’s views on language and history come together in his claim about the generational reproduction of traditions of thought:

17 Ibid. p.6.
A man cannot receive a heritage of ideas without transforming it by the very fact that he comes to know it, without injecting his own and always different way of being into it\textsuperscript{18}.

All these different manifestations of ambiguity occur because at base they are expressing a deep ontological truth about the structure of being, a truth that is necessarily occluded ‘by the (Cartesian) assumption that the world consists of discrete substances whose properties may be clearly and univocally enumerated’\textsuperscript{19}. Merleau-Ponty’s ontological category ‘being-in-the-world’ is intended to capture this deep ambiguity at its most basic level, the body-world relation. ‘The world’ and the ‘subject’ can be given Empiricist and Intellectualist interpretations not simply because of a flagrant and cavalier misuse of our intellectual capacities. Rather, it is because the perceived world as revealed phenomenologically is a world that suggests just these kinds of theories due to the nature of perception and of the world revealed through it.

Thus on this account Empiricism and Intellectualism are not simply wrong theories to be discarded in a contest of progressive theoretical supersession. For this presupposes that Empiricism, Intellectualism and existentialism are all operating within the same metatheoretical framework and problematic. But, as I have argued, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of philosophy consists in a substantive break with these philosophies and their key Cartesian epistemological and ontological assumptions. As such, Merleau-Ponty would not go along with Gardner’s statement

\textsuperscript{18} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity’, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{19} ‘Ambiguity’ in Michelman, \textit{Historical Dictionary of Existentialism}. 
above that ‘all that remains’ of the key problems of modern philosophy, after the relationship between objective thought and pre-objective being has been grasped, ‘is the recognition that there is in reality, i.e. in pre-objective being, an irresolvable “ambiguity”’. Instead, he would say that the key problems of modern philosophy cannot be simply discarded, precisely because objective thought is not an optional way of theorising that we may or may not choose to take up. It is in fact a product of the natural attitude, which we necessarily use in everyday life and in science.

3. Merleau-Ponty’s Antinomies: Mid-way between Kant and Hegel

Gardner points out that Merleau-Ponty locates the antinomies ‘mid-way between’ Kant’s and Hegel’s conceptions. Hegel critiques Kant’s view in two key ways. The first problem is that Kant fails to see that ‘antinomial structure is ubiquitous in thought’\(^{20}\). And the second is that he fails to grasp the true significance of the Antinomy, mistakenly subjectivising the antinomies. On Kant’s view ‘the relevant contradictions should be regarded as a function of the subject's mode of cognition’\(^{21}\). As Hegel puts it:

The explanation offered by Kant alleges that the contradiction does not affect the object in its own proper essence, but attaches only to the Reason which seeks to comprehend it … The blemish of contradiction, it seems, could not


\(^{21}\) *Ibid.*
be allowed to mar the essence of the world; but there could be no objection to attach it to the thinking Reason, to the essence of mind.22

By contrast, Hegel argues that we should instead ‘lay the blame for contradiction on the objects, for failing to cohere with thought’23. Kant, he argues:

… never got beyond the negative result that the thing-in-itself is unknowable, and never penetrated to the discovery of what the antinomies really and positively mean. That true and positive meaning of the antinomies is this: that every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements. Consequently to know, or, in other words, to comprehend an object is equivalent to being conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations24.

Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the antinomies is located mid-way between these two models. As Gardner observes, Merleau-Ponty ‘analyses antinomy as a function of the relation between the body-subject’s capacity for objective thought and the “real ambiguity” present as a fundamental structural feature of the perceived world’25. Gardner goes on to point out that Merleau-Ponty holds the Hegelian view that:

… we should reject the ‘reproach of ambivalence’, i.e. that we should regard antinomy as a philosophical discovery, and not as a failure of philosophical

24 Hegel, (Encyclopaedia) Logic (1817), §48.
thought showing the need to withdraw our logically contradictory description of the world.\textsuperscript{26}

On Merleau-Ponty’s view, ‘if this contact [with being] really is ambivalent, it is for us to accommodate ourselves to it’\textsuperscript{27}. Thus, as Gardner argues, ‘we must also accept, with Kant, that conceptuality is in some sense impugned by antinomy’\textsuperscript{28}. And in the case of Merleau-Ponty it is the thesis of the primacy of perception that this serves to legitimate, with its necessary constraints on the pretensions of autonomous rationality.

Merleau-Ponty's distinct approach to the problem of the antinomies incorporates elements of Kant's transcendental idealism and Hegelian absolute idealism. With Hegelian absolute idealism Merleau-Ponty rejects things in themselves, affirms a version of subject-object identity in his phenomenological conception of pre-objectivity, and aims to transcend the opposition of realism and idealism. However as I argued in the previous chapter, Merleau-Ponty's holds, with Kantian idealism, a conception of transcendental theorising that understands transcendental conditions as inherently perspectival. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological conception of subjectivity is finite and limited as with the Kantian subject. However, it is nonetheless the case that as Gardner rightly observes:

The perspectival character of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the transcendental is what marks his difference from conceptions of the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p.75.
transcendental in objective thought: Kant’s ‘eternal’, *a priori* subjectivity is, in Merleau-Ponty's view, not rigorously perspectival … \(^{29}\)

It is through his use of the concept of intentionality and the phenomenology of the lived body that Merleau-Ponty gives this notion of perspectival subjectivity a more consistent account. However, what Gardner misses is that Merleau-Ponty views the incorporation of dialectics as vital in order to help fully articulate this picture.

### 4. Merleau-Ponty’s Appropriation of Dialectics

Merleau-Ponty discusses his general interpretation of Hegel, and the relation of his own position to it, in the essay ‘Hegel’s existentialism’\(^{30}\). In the essay he argues that the central movements in modern philosophy that he seeks to integrate in his own position – phenomenology, existentialism and Marxism – do not appreciate that their origin lies in Hegel’s philosophy. ‘Not that Hegel himself offers the truth we are seeking’, says Merleau-Ponty, but rather:

> If we do not despair of a *truth* above and beyond divergent points of view, if we remain dedicated to a new classicism, an organic civilization, while maintaining the sharpest sense of subjectivity, then no task in the cultural order is more urgent than re-establishing the connection between on the one

\(^{29}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{30}\) This essay was occasioned by Jean Hyppolite's lecture of the same title, delivered on February 16, 1947, to *l’Institut d’Études Germaniques*. ‘The great interest of Hyppolite's lecture is that, as far as existentialism is concerned, it begins the translation which will illuminate the discussions of our time’. Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, in *Sense and Non-Sense*, p.64.
hand, the thankless doctrines which try to forget their Hegelian origin and, on the other, that origin itself\(^{31}\).

The Hegelian dimension to Merleau-Ponty’s thought can be seen in the importation of dialectics in his conception of reason, of meaning, and thus in the ontology that he constructs through them. Merleau-Ponty argues that Hegel is vitally important to existential phenomenology because he is the philosopher who ‘started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason …’\(^{32}\) By ‘the irrational’ Merleau-Ponty is not referring to the incoherent or contradictory. Rather, he means non-rational in the sense of the lived or the existential. Merleau-Ponty sees his attempt to incorporate the pre-reflective intentionality of the lived body into philosophy as Hegelian in this sense. Thus, like Hegel, he seeks ‘a new idea of reason’ that does not forget ‘the ‘experience of unreason’\(^{33}\). This expanded, yet concrete and situated, conception derives from the ‘Hegel of 1807’, the Hegel of *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Merleau-Ponty finds this Hegel’s conception of a phenomenological exploration of the concrete historical structures of meaningful human activity – for example ‘customs, economic structures, and legal institutions’\(^{34}\) – consonant with the existentialist’s profound concern with one’s concrete situation. This is because it:

\[\ldots\] does not try to fit all history into a framework of pre-established logic but attempts to bring each doctrine and each era back to life and to let itself be

\(^{32}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{33}\) Merleau-Ponty, ‘Author’s Preface’ in *Sense and Non-Sense*, p.3.  
guided by their internal logic with such impartiality that all concern with system seems forgotten\textsuperscript{35}.

Thus, Hegel’s phenomenological thought is ‘existentialist in that it views man not as being from the start a consciousness in full possession of its own clear thoughts but as a life which is its own responsibility and which tries to understand itself\textsuperscript{36}.

Merleau-Ponty agrees with the Hegelian idea that it is the philosopher’s task to ‘reveal the immanent logic of human experience’. So, like Hegel he rejects the Kantian opposition of matter and form, the view that experience can somehow be analysed into meaningless matter to which the mind gives form, or meaning. And, with Hegel, he affirms that experience itself is pregnant with meaningful form. Unlike Kant, Merleau-Ponty holds that the conditions of experience are not susceptible to analysis in terms of form and content. As we saw previously, Kant holds that the conditions of experience can be divided between the form of experience and the contents of experience, where the \textit{a priori} forms of intuition (time and space) and the categories of the understanding are taken to give form to the formless ‘manifold of sensation’ (the contents of perception). As Gardner characterises Merleau-Ponty’s view: ‘pre-objective perception is intuitive, and it is intuitive without being, like Kant's matter of experience, determinately formless; it is a formed-content\textsuperscript{37}.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p.65.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
From a Kantian perspective it might be argued that the exact nature of this formed-content, which Merleau-Ponty discusses under the theme of ‘the world that is always already there’, is not made entirely clear. Merleau-Ponty, for his part, would see this as a criticism informed by Intellectualist confusions about the nature of perception and of the perceived world. He would not see this as a shortcoming. He would argue that the notion that the ‘formed-content’ structure that comprises the world (‘a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning’), and the objects within it, could be made entirely clear is based on failing to grasp the significance of the constraints placed on the reach of rationality due to its intrinsic situatedness. Rather, by implicitly ‘postulating a knowledge rendered totally explicit’ it instantiates an unjustified ‘presumption on reason’s part’. The world that is ‘always already there’ is a primitive experiential dimension that represents our primordial contact with, and participation in, being. As such, it necessarily resists a total explication. Thus for him the form/content binarism is a product of objective thought, one that he does not feel obliged to theorise the structure of pre-objective being in terms of. This is because the characterisation of pre-objectivity is in the last analysis answerable to the content and structure of our lived experience rather than to ‘logicist’ either/or categorial frameworks. Only a dialectical type of reason can capture the nature of the form/content relation manifested in the formed-content structure of perceptual phenomena.

In relation to our earlier discussion of the role of antinomies, Merleau-Ponty’s identification of the philosopher’s role as the revealer of the ‘immanent logic

39 *Ibid*, p.73.
of experience’ necessitates his fundamental rejection of the ‘reproach of ambivalence’. Although he provides no explicit account of his adoption of this key move, it is clear that he assents to the view that the dialectical embracing of what are traditionally understood to be antinomies is appropriate for the philosophical level of thinking because this move is adequately phenomenologically grounded. Its appropriateness is further demonstrated by the way that it enables us to overcome irresolvable traditional philosophical problems.

Although Merleau-Ponty understands the dialectical nature of the world differently from Hegel, his dialectical conception of reason has its origin in Hegel’s critique of Kant’s distinction between ‘the understanding’ and ‘Reason’. Attacking the legitimacy of this distinction, Hegel advocates a kind of thinking that is not constrained by this core Kantian schema. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues that our cognitive capacities are empirically constrained in such a way that only possible objects of experience are capable of becoming possible objects of knowledge. The understanding is the faculty through which we can acquire knowledge of the objects of experience. Reason, in contrast, is the faculty that seeks, but can never achieve, knowledge of an experience-transcendent reality. Thus in its application in the speculative metaphysical philosophies of the Rationalists it becomes a faculty that leads to unjustifiable conceptual constructions. Merleau-Ponty interprets Hegel as advocating a speculative rational faculty, a ‘quasi-Kantian Reason
(Vernunft)’ as Stephen Priest puts it. Thus we see Merleau-Ponty arguing that Hegel has a conception of ‘Reason’ that is:

... broader than the understanding, which can respect the variety and singularity of individual consciousnesses, civilizations, ways of thinking, and historical contingency, but which nevertheless does not give up the attempt to master them in order to guide them back to their own truth.

However, in Merleau-Ponty’s version it is not applied in the service of an absolute idealist metaphysics. Instead it is constrained through the phenomenological principle of evidence and pressed into the service of existential ontology, the search for the concrete existential structures of human being.

Merleau-Ponty claims that the most fruitful way to interpret Hegel’s philosophy is through the lens of existential phenomenology. Thus, he suggests that we ought to ‘base his logic on his phenomenology and not his phenomenology on his logic’. This inverts Hegel’s own understanding of his philosophy where the logic is the key to understanding the true meaning of the phenomenology. This inversion is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s central thesis of the primacy of perception and his philosophy of the concrete where all ontological claims are understood to rest on a phenomenological grounding.

---

40 Priest, Merleau-Ponty, p.38.
42 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Battle over Existentialism’ in Sense and Non-Sense, p.81.
In Hegel’s philosophy ‘the separation of the material and the immaterial can be explained only on the basis of the original unity of both’\(^\text{43}\). However, on Hegel’s account the relationship between body and spirit (\textit{Geist}) is a relationship between a particular and a universal, thus: body and universal \textit{Geist}. It is impossible to translate the German word ‘\textit{Geist}’ into English and retain all of its resonances. The two main ways it has been rendered are ‘spirit’ or ‘mind’. The term ‘spirit’ has divine connotations while ‘mind’ represents the mental as it is commonly understood, in contrast to the physical. Both are intended in his conception of, as Peter Singer puts it, ‘an over-arching collective Mind that is an active force throughout history, and of which all individual minds—that is, all human beings, considered in their mental aspect—are a part’\(^\text{44}\).

On Hegel’s account the physical world is an expression of universal \textit{Geist}. For example he says:

In truth the immaterial is not related to the material as particular to a particular but as the true universal which overarches and embraces particularity is related to the particular; the particular material thing in its isolation has no truth, no independence in face of the immaterial\(^\text{45}\).
Nevertheless, *Geist* cannot exist but through the physical through which it expresses itself and comes to know itself in a process of progressive historical self-realisation. Not, however, at the level of the individual but at the level of human collectivities through which *Geist* is manifest and which evolves in a process of dialectical movement that Hegel refers to as ‘sublation’ (*Aufgehoben*). ‘Sublation’ is Hegel’s term that is intended to capture the movement of synthesis between two opposing or contradictory historical forms of human life and consciousness. As Robert Sinnerbrink observes, Hegelian dialectics is:

… the attempt … to show the relatedness of opposing terms, the negative movement of thought from one determination [thesis] to its opposite [antithesis], and their synthesis within a more complex configuration of conceptual meaning. Dialectic thus underscores the role of negation in the constitution of positivity (the new emerges out of the negation or superceding of the old)\(^6\).

In Hegel’s dialectics the movement of historical forms of human life and consciousness proceeds via ‘a determinate negation that both cancels and preserves’, a “‘supercession’ that synthesises opposing terms into a more integrated and complex ‘conceptual unity’"\(^7\). This is a process whereby a general historical form of life is grasped as generating a contradictory form contained within it and where, through a process of dynamic historical development, the two forms are subsumed and transformed (sublated) via a new synthesis into a new form. This new form, in


\(^7\) *Ibid.*
turn, contains its own contradictions, which will develop towards a new sublation, and so on.

Hegel’s account of the process and the stages of the growing historical expression of Geist in human activities in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is complex as it is intended to be an account of all the stages of consciousness that Hegel thinks are possible. The details of this story, however, are not important for our purposes because Merleau-Ponty completely rejects Hegel’s conception of the world as the expression of Geist, as well as the account of the stages which Hegel claims the evolution of Geist to involve.

Hegel holds that the mental and the physical are united in an ultimate reality: ‘universal Geist’. He understands universal Geist as the unity of all dialectical opposition, including particular and general. Geist, then, is in fact the totality of what exists, as it really is. Hegel’s ‘absolute idealism’ is reminiscent of pantheism in that it holds that ultimately the individual minds of finite human beings are perspectives of one universal divine mind called Geist. ‘Spirit is this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses’48. He also holds that at each higher stage of development Geist comes closer to understanding itself. The culmination of this historical process, claims Hegel, is ‘Absolute knowing’ (*Absolute Wissen*), whereby there is a ‘unity of thought and being’ and Spirit … knows itself as Spirit”49. In Hegel’s conception of absolute knowing, as Stephen Priest puts it:

---

48 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.110.
49 Ibid. p.493.
… there is no difference between what is knowing what it is and what is being what it is: it is what it knows and it knows what it is. All the various dialectical structures of consciousness and self-consciousness are subsumed or aufgehoben into the ultimate speculative synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity, epistemology and ontology\textsuperscript{50}.

This identity of knowing and being in ‘Absolute knowing’ – the claim that consciousness and that which exists are ultimately identical – is why Hegel’s idealist position is referred to as ‘absolute idealism’.

Merleau-Ponty rejects Hegel’s ‘absolute idealism’ with its concept of ‘universal Geist’, believing that Hegel fails to appreciate the significance of the insights that his phenomenology helps to reveal. The most important of these is that the concrete ‘incarnation’ of consciousness in a cultural and historical situation places constraints on human experience and thus on human knowledge. For Merleau-Ponty, following Kierkegaard, the metaphysical aspect of Hegel’s philosophy that we have just been discussing ‘offers us nothing but a ‘palace of ideas … where all historical antitheses are overcome, but only by thought’\textsuperscript{51}. As Hubert Dreyfus observes:

Hegel attempts to overcome the incompleteness and contradictions in individual experience by absorbing the individual in a universal harmony,

\textsuperscript{50} Priest, Merleau-Ponty, p.40. cf: Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 490. 
\textsuperscript{51} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p.64.
thus eliminating the incarnate perceiver … who raised the original difficulties\textsuperscript{52}.

Merleau-Ponty views this part of his philosophy as deeply misguided arguing that:

Insofar as he reduced history to the history of the spirit, Hegel found the final synthesis heralded and guaranteed in his own consciousness, in his certainty at having understood history completely; and in the very realization of his philosophy. How could he help being optimistic, when history was consciousness’s return to itself and the internal logic of the idea as he lived it in himself testified to the necessity of this return and to man's possibility of attaining totality and freedom from anxiety?\textsuperscript{53}

Whereas, by contrast, existential philosophy:

… which renounces absolute Spirit as history's motive force, and which admits no other reason in things than that revealed by their meeting and interaction, could not affirm \textit{a priori} man's possibility for wholeness, postulate a final synthesis resolving all contradictions or affirm its inevitable realization\textsuperscript{54}.

\textsuperscript{52} Hubert Dreyfus, ‘Editor's Introduction’ in \textit{Sense and Non-Sense}, p.xviii.
\textsuperscript{53} Merleau-Ponty. ‘The Battle over Existentialism’, p.81.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}
Hegel doesn’t learn the lesson that phenomenology teaches us about how the perspectival and incompletable nature of perceptual experience cancels the possibility of any necessary meaning and direction in historical experience. Hegel’s view of a meaning that is implicit in all experience that will in the end be made fully explicit overcomes the contingency and perspectivity of our lived perceptual experience. As Merleau-Ponty has shown us, we are irreducibly embodied beings and the contingency of our perceptual experience is at the base of all of our cultural activities and endeavours. It follows from this that there can be no justification for claims regarding an ultimate achievement of social or cosmic order in Hegel’s sense.

The degree of transformation that Hegel’s ideas undergo in Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation is exemplified in the fact that he is capable of making the suggestion that we should read Hegel’s ‘Absolute knowing’ (*Absolute Wissen*) in existentialist terms:

> Absolute knowledge, the final stage in the evolution of the spirit as phenomenon wherein consciousness at last becomes equal to its spontaneous life and regains its self-possession, is perhaps not a philosophy but a way of life.

By any standards this is an extremely unorthodox interpretation of ‘Absolute knowing’ that goes very much against the grain of Hegel’s thought. It is, however, a powerful example of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘existentialising’ of Hegel. And what it begins to illustrate for us is the pattern by which Merleau-Ponty brings together existential

---

55 Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p.64.
and Hegelian concepts in his ontology. He brings them together in order that the Hegelian concepts be recast, giving them a thoroughly existential reading designed to flesh out and enhance his fundamentally existential view. Thus it is suggested, in line with his existentialist emphasis on lived experience and on action, that ‘absolute knowing’ is interpreted in terms of an experience that cannot be intellectually grasped but instead must be lived. This rendering of ‘absolute knowing’ is not so much an incorporation of the idea as a transformation. Merleau-Ponty does not go on to work out this suggestion in any detail and what he is perhaps really up to here is attempting to draw Hegelian scholars into an appreciation of the phenomenological concept of the depth and richness of pre-objective lived perceptual experience in powerful terms with which they are familiar. Thus, indicating where they really ought to be looking if they wish to see a genuine – lived – overcoming of the conceptual contradictions that exercise philosophers in the European tradition.

Merleau-Ponty’s existentialising of this Hegelian concept is not simply the suggestion of a way that we might read Hegel in order to get a fuller appreciation of Hegel, but rather represents the morphing of Hegel into Merleau-Ponty, so to speak. What the suggestion really amounts to is an indication that the philosopher who attends to pre-objective lived experience finds an experiential structure that shares certain qualities that Hegel attributes to ‘Absolute knowing’. Namely, it is an existential unity (being-in-the-world) that is prior to the subject-object distinction. It is also an existential unity of being and ‘knowing’ in the sense that pre-objective perception involves simultaneously an intentional and ontological relation with the world: a pre-reflective intentional relation and an existential relation. It is both our access to being via the perceived world as well as a kind of ‘knowing’ that we live.
We don’t just grasp being reflectively but rather we *live being* in the body-world relation, and our pre-reflective grasp of the perceived world is a kind of ‘antepredicative knowledge’\(^{56}\). Thus, Merleau-Ponty talks about the philosopher as attempting to capture in reflection our lived pre-reflective bodily ‘complicity’ with the world, a primordial ‘pact’ of which our pre-reflective bodily being ‘knows’ more than we do from our explicit reflective stance towards it.

### 5. The Three Principal Senses of Dialectic in Phenomenology of Perception

Although Merleau-Ponty’s brazen existentialising of ‘absolute knowing’ serves to indicate something of the way that Merleau-Ponty treats Hegelian concepts in his transformative appropriation, nothing theoretically substantive rests on this suggestion. If we turn to the issue of dialectics, however, the same cannot be said. Merleau-Ponty recruits dialectics in his attempt to understand the existentialist ‘lived’. In connection with this, Sebastian Gardner argues that Merleau-Ponty's claim that ‘antinomy is in some sense “true” appears to call for the Schelling-Hegel apparatus of speculative identity’\(^{57}\). Gardner further observes that Merleau-Ponty effectively acknowledges this to be the case by his introduction of the concept of ‘chiasmus’ in his late work, where he argues that ‘the self and the non-self are like the obverse and the reverse … by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we

\(^{56}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.82 (italics added).

become world. In his discussion Gardner draws our attention to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘working notes’ for *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he discusses a ‘return to ontology’ in order to address ‘the subject-object question’ with the goal of elaborating ‘notions that have to replace’ those of subject and object.

In spite of these observations, Gardner fails to grasp the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s putative version of the speculative identity claim incorporates dialectics within an existential-phenomenological framework. Merleau-Ponty does this in order to provide a ‘logic’ – a kind of thinking – that is appropriate to the task of describing the phenomena and their relations as revealed to the phenomenologist. So when he talks of his fundamental existential categories (e.g., body-subject, being-in-the-world) as dialectical, what he is claiming is that dialectics is the only way to express the structures that are present in our dynamic lived experience. But this is the case *only* if we reconfigure dialectical thought, strictly constraining it by ‘the principle of phenomenology’. So ‘dialectical unity’ in Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist sense is not the same thing as Hegel’s sublation (*aufheben*). In Hegel, a ‘dialectical unity’ is born out of an antinomy that is subsumed in a historical process of ‘sublation’, that involves a ‘determinate negation’ that ‘cancels and preserves’, synthesising opposing terms into a more complex unity. This is not the case for Merleau-Ponty because of the ontological primacy of the pre-objective perceived world. As we have seen, it is the nature of the pre-objective perceived world to produce an antinomy of objective thought (the antinomy of Empiricism and Intellectualism, realism and idealism), as it draws on the either/or binaristic structure

---

inherent in objective thought to represent our lived experience. This antinomial structure is a necessary feature of our natural existence due to the fact that we live in the natural attitude. And the natural attitude is a result of a powerful intrinsic tendency to understand perception on the model of objects, a tendency that is built into the very structure of perception itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s account of the relation between Empiricism and Intellectualism as they try to make sense of pre-objective being is an example of how he uses a dialectical strategy of argument. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty doesn’t simply proceed by asserting and defending the position that he advocates. Rather, he addresses each successive topic in the book via a description and analysis that outlines familiar approaches to the phenomenon in question and then ‘measures’ them in relation to the phenomenon they purport to explain. Doing this allows them to demonstrate their own inadequacies. Merleau-Ponty first describes an Empiricist account of the phenomenon in question, where the subject is held to be inherently passive and acted on by an objective external world. Analysing this account in relation to the phenomenon that it purports to explain reveals an insufficient account of the contribution of subjectivity. He then turns to an Intellectualist account as an alternative, where the subject is viewed as inherently active, constituting the world of experience. Analysing this account in relation to the phenomenon that it purports to explain reveals an insufficient account of the contribution of the body and the world, the passive dimension of the phenomena. Merleau-Ponty then argues, as John Russon points out, that:
… the positive characteristics of the phenomenon revealed through these accounts, together with their mutual insufficiencies, are then shown to point to the need for a third form of accounting for the phenomenon that reveals the subject (and *mutatis mutandis* the object) to be being-in-the-world, a condition that … necessarily underlies and makes possible the sorts of attitudes that [E]mpiricism and [Intellectualism] presume to be primary\(^{59}\).

By thinking - from within - through the implications of one-sided accounts Merleau-Ponty shows how they are both in need of supplementation by what they exclude as opposite. But he then goes on to show how these ‘objectivist’ accounts are locked in an antinomial relationship with each other because their meaning derives from a more basic form of experience that is not defined in terms of the antithesis that characterises the two opposites, and which provides their conditions of possibility.

So the move from objective thought to existential-phenomenological thought involves a dialectical interplay between the claims of Empiricism and Intellectualism that is ‘resolved’ in the move to existentialism: a ‘third form of accounting for the phenomenon’. However, it is important to emphasise that the ‘resolution’ of the antinomial structure of objective thought is achieved through the phenomenology of the pre-reflective perceived world. The argument is that what phenomenological description finds is that the antinomies are always already ‘overcome’ at this pre-objective level of experience. This is because at this level we experience ourselves, not as Cartesian souls in mechanical bodies, but as body-subjects. And we experience the world not as completely independent from us, as a totality of objects,

---

\(^{59}\) Russon, ‘Dialectic, Difference and the Other’, pp.32-33.
but as the horizontal and perspectival phenomenological world of our concrete experience – a ‘world-for-us’. Likewise, we do not experience objects as absolute and subject-independent things-in-themselves; rather, we experience objects perspectivally, as a transcendence in immanence, an ‘in-itself-for-us’.

Merleau-Ponty’s references to Hegel do not always make his position immediately clear and are written in a way that invites misunderstanding. For example, he argues in relation to the opposition of being-for-itself and being-in-itself that:

The synthesis of *in itself* and *for itself* which brings Hegelian freedom into being has, however, its truth. In a sense, *it is the very definition of existence*, since it is effected at every moment before our eyes in the phenomenon of presence, only to be quickly re-enacted, since it does not conjure away our finitude.

So, for Merleau-Ponty ‘the lived synthesis of subject and object’ is ‘effected every moment before our eyes’ in our pre-objective experience precisely because we are an ‘Ek-stase’, a transcendence toward a world, not a pure subject. But this is also because ‘the world’ defies the status of pure object by partaking in a ‘communion’, that is in its co-constitutional role with respect to the perceived world. This primordial process is ‘the very definition of existence’.

---

60 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.375.
Merleau-Ponty’s reference to Hegel here is, however, potentially misleading. This is because his talk of ‘the synthesis of in itself and for itself’ ‘having its truth’ might be taken to suggest two separate parts that are coming together and being synthesised. But this is not what Merleau-Ponty means. The key phrase here is: ‘the synthesis of in itself and for itself’ is an idea that ‘has its truth’. By ‘having its truth’ Merleau-Ponty means that, in as much as the Hegelian idea of speculative identity articulates a theme that his phenomenology more truly captures in its account of the body-subject as being-in-the-world, it is approximating to our true ontological structure. Being-in-the-world is the fundamental ontological concept for Merleau-Ponty, expressing a primordial existential unity. There are in actuality no ‘opposites’ here because, strictly speaking, the two putative parts (for-itself/in-itself) do not exist. They are, in fact, a product of viewing the issue from the perspective of objective thought. In reality the terms capture two inseparable moments of a primordial existential whole.

Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of an ‘existential-dialectical unity’ to characterise this primordial existential whole. This is because it consists of two distinguishable, though ultimately inseparable, aspects. On this view ‘unity’ has to be understood in the sense of ‘dialectically dependent’. As Stephen Priest puts it:

… a and b are dialectically dependent if and only if not a then not b and if not b then not a. Then we have the thesis that there is no subject without a world and a situation and no world and no situation without a subject. Subject on the one hand and world or situation on the other hand are then ‘identical’ in
the sense that they are parts of a single existential whole, or primordial existential unity\(^62\).

Paradoxical though this is, says Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely what phenomenology reveals to us.

The foregoing discussion has specified two of the three principal senses of ‘dialectic’ for Merleau-Ponty. The first sense is that of a dialectical form of argument that articulates the dialectical relations between Empiricism and Intellectualism, and their ‘overcoming’ in the phenomenology of pre-objective lived experience. This is Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic of object thought. The role that the term ‘dialectic’ is playing here is that it expresses both a) the structure of the argument and b) the structure of the relation between subject and object that his argument articulates. Basically, if you follow Empiricism through to its conceptual limits then you get Intellectualism and vice versa, provided that you are thinking within the framework of objective thought. Only by going beyond objective thought are you able to make sense of its existential ground. So a ‘dialectic of objective thought’ points us in the direction of the existential ground. However, when we arrive at that ground the second principal use of ‘dialectic’ serves to characterise the nature of that ground. This usage operates in the articulation of the existential-dialectical ‘unities’ of ‘body-subject’ and ‘being-in-the-world’, beyond the constraints of objective thought. These distinct usages, taken together, illustrate how ‘pre-objective being’ functions as both mediating term and ground simultaneously. However, in its role as mediator, it is emphatically not mediating two genuinely separate individual things (bodies and

\(^{62}\) Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, p.50.
minds, subjects and objects), rather it appears to be when we approach the issue from the perspective of objective thought. And approaching the issue from the perspective of objective thought is something that we inevitably have to do because we live in the natural attitude. So, in relation to the role of pre-objective being as existential ground, it should now be clear that in the formulation of basic ontological categories and relations it is the existential mode of interpretation that is the more fundamental usage. This is because the existential-dialectical relations that are articulated in the ontological terms ‘body-subject’ and ‘being-in-the-world’ provide the conditions of possibility for the dialectic of objective thought played out in the contest between Empiricism and Intellectualism. Thus, the second principal usage (existential-dialectical categories) underpins the first (the dialectic of objective thought).

We are now in a position to see why recent authors have struggled to provide an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty that does justice to his conception of existential dialectics. Stephen Priest, for example, fails to present a coherent statement as to how Merleau-Ponty understands his use of dialectics to be reconciled with his existential ontology. When interpreting the claim that:

The relationship between subject and object is no longer that relationship of knowing postulated by classical idealism, wherein the object always seems the construction of the subject, but a relationship of being in which,
paradoxically, the subject is his body, his world, and his situation, by a sort of exchange\textsuperscript{63}.

Priest uses the strategy of offering the reader two interpretations. ‘There are at least two ways of understanding the \textit{prima facie} paradoxical ‘relationship of being’ in which the subject is his world, and situation’, says Priest. One is ‘quasi Heideggerean’, the other ‘quasi Hegelian’, and he goes on to explicate them both. Priest’s ‘quasi-Heideggerean’ interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s claim states that:

I am identified with the totality of my pragmatic interests in a situation, including everything that I am confronted with and everything that I try to use as a means to an end … On the Heideggerian construal a world or a situation is someone’s world or situation … if there is no person without the world that is theirs then, plausibly, their world is essentially what they are\textsuperscript{64}.

His accompanying ‘quasi-Hegelian’ interpretation states that:

… ‘identical’ has to be understood as ‘dialectically dependent’ such that a and b are dialectically dependent if and only if if not a then not b and if not b then not a. Then we have the thesis that there is no subject without a world and a situation and no world and no situation without a subject. Subject on

\textsuperscript{63} Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Battle over Existentialism’, p.72. cf Merleau-Ponty’s conclusion to his introductory statement on the problem of the body in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}: ‘And since the genesis of the objective body is only a moment in the constitution of the object, the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal to us the perceiving subject as the perceived world’. Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.83.

\textsuperscript{64} Priest, Merleau-Ponty, p.50.
the one hand and world or situation on the other hand are then ‘identical’ in
the sense that they are parts of a single existential whole, or primordial
existential unity\textsuperscript{65}.

Priest is certainly on the right track with his double-stranded construal, and his
definition of dialectical dependence is very helpful. However, he fails to appreciate
the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s integration of the ‘Hegelian’ within the context of the
‘Heideggerean’. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty integrates the two terminologies in
his ‘existential dialectic’, precisely because his conception of reason and meaning
dovetails with his desire to be responsive to what he comes to understand as the
ontological ambiguity in its variety of phenomenological manifestations. You cannot
make sense of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that ‘the subject is his body, his world, and his
situation, by a sort of exchange’, or of his talk of revealing ‘the perceiving subject as
the perceived world’, without understanding the primacy of the perceived world as
the core of the ‘existential’ that sets out the context in which the ‘dialectical’
reasoning operates. It provides it with its frame as well as its constraints.

John Russon also fails to grasp this in his claim that ‘the
\textit{Phenomenology of Perception} can … with equal legitimacy, be called a book of
Hegelian or Husserlian (or, for that matter, Heideggerean) phenomenology’\textsuperscript{66}. Now
despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty views Hegel as an important influence, clearly
appropriating a conception of dialectical reason that originates with Hegel, Russon’s
claim is mistaken. The legitimacy here is not equal because, as we have seen,

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{66} Russon, ‘Dialectic, Difference and the Other’, pp.32-33.
Phenomenology of Perception is first and foremost a work of existential phenomenology. And this is the case because Merleau-Ponty consistently follows through on the foundational principle of Husserlian phenomenology, the principle of evidence, exposing the limits of the Husserlian account in its inability to cope with the passive constitution of the background – the world, the body, perception. However, in order to account for the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the phenomena he encounters, he formulates a conception of reason, meaning and ontology as existential – that is, bound by the necessary situatedness of the subject in a world. But he also understands this conception of reason as dialectical, not constrained by the either/or categorial framework that structures objective thought. Merleau-Ponty’s is a view of reason that expresses the subtle mutual dependencies between putative opposites: body/mind, subject/object, interior/exterior, individual/cultural context.

I will now link the discussion of ambiguity, which I explored in Chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter, with my examples of recent discussions of dialectics in Phenomenology of Perception. The purpose of this is to indicate the way in which, like Priest, these authors fall short of providing a clear account of the core of Merleau-Ponty’s existential dialectics. In my discussion of ambiguity I pointed out how Merleau-Ponty holds that a central expression of our fundamental ontological ambiguity can be seen in our experience of the lived body. The body is lived by me as being ambiguous between the notion of a pure ‘subject’ (a pure consciousness) and a pure ‘object’ (in the sense of an extended substance). What phenomenological investigation reveals is that the body that we live cannot be characterised by either of these basic concepts of objective thought. Hence, Merleau-Ponty argues, only an
existential dialectic can do that. Thus we have the ontological category – the existential-dialectical category – ‘body-subject’ to express the irresolvable ambiguity that we live, as we are perceiving/perceived. I phenomenally experience my body as I live through it, as that through which there is a perceptual world. And yet in the way that others can perceive my body as an exteriority in the world, I am a ‘perceived’ for others. Thus I am a perceiving/perceived.

In connection with this is the existential-dialectical structure of the body/world relation. As we saw earlier, Moran refers to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as ‘dialectical’ because Merleau-Ponty ‘sees the relations between humans and the world’ as consisting in a complex and inextricable ‘intertwining’ between body and world. Moran is right to identify this as the foundational locus of Merleau-Ponty’s existential dialectic, which is captured in his account of the body-subject as ‘being-in-the-world’. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty, on phenomenological grounds, rejects the (Cartesian) assumption that the world and the subject are ontologically separable. What phenomenological investigation reveals is that all of our experience is fundamentally world-oriented, through our pre-reflective intentional relation. There can be no objects of experience except through our taking up of those objects as figures standing out against a background, or world, which is essential for them being the objects that they are. The world for us is ‘always already there’; we are consciousness-for-a-world. Likewise there can be no conception of ‘world’ but through the body-subject’s capacities for having a world. A world is that which is structured in relation to the bodily explorations of a motor-intentional subject. Thus

---

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical strategy for dealing with the irremovable ambiguity of the body/world relation is to conceptualise it, on phenomenological grounds, as the existential-dialectical structure ‘being-in-the-world’.

Helping to fill out the detail of this picture is the ‘dialectic of milieu and action’68 that Dreyfus identifies in his discussion of the learning of skilled behaviour. In this discussion he emphasises the ‘feedback structure’ by which ‘past experience is projected back into the perceptual world of the learner’, showing up as ‘affordances or solicitations to further action’69. The ambiguity being addressed concerns the way that, in perceiving the world in terms of affordances or ‘solicitations to further action’, perceptual body-subjects are engaged in a process by which our phenomenal field is structured in terms of our bodily capacities for movement and action. These capacities, in turn, rely on us learning a vast array of ways in which we can interact with the world. The acquisition of a skill, such as throwing a rock, results in the restructuring of our phenomenal field in terms of our new skill. We now see rocks, or rock-like objects, as ‘affording’ picking up and throwing. But this process involves a complex ‘feedback structure’ whereby a given skill can be modified, refined and even relearned. Think of someone with an awkward throwing style learning a more efficient throwing style and thus restructuring their perceptual field in terms of their new bodily capacity. This process is dialectical because the perceived world is structured in relation to our bodily capacities, while our bodily capacities are structured in relation and response to the perceived world which solicits them and through which they are exercised.

The final example concerns the third of the three principal usages of dialectic in Merleau-Ponty: the dialectic at the level of language and culture. It is this dialectic that Taylor Carman refers to when he says that for Merleau-Ponty dialectic:

… seems to consist in a kind of holism, an appreciation of the superficiality of familiar dualisms, the mutual dependence of their terms, and the way in which new forms of understanding emerge not by direct confirmation or refutation of considered judgments, but fluidly and unpredictably through transformations in our ways of being in the world.\(^{70}\)

This existential-dialectic addresses an irresolvable ambiguity revealed in the phenomenology of cultural experience. Our cultural experience is fundamentally a historical experience, and history is also ambiguous between objective and subjective. This is because events of the past come to be understood only through particular human interpretations, and these interpretations of past events go on to influence future events. So while we in a sense ‘receive’ a ‘heritage of ideas’ that are, as such, ‘external’ to us, this ‘external’ heritage is only accessible through our ‘subjective’ interpretations, which necessarily ‘inject’ our ‘own and always different way of being into [them]’.\(^{71}\) So as Merleau-Ponty puts it, in ‘taking up’ a cultural tradition of thought we ‘[transform] it by the very fact that [we] come … to know it’.\(^{72}\) And so ‘new forms of understanding emerge not by direct confirmation or refutation of considered judgments, but fluidly and unpredictably through


\(^{71}\) Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity’, p. 224.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
transformations in our ways of being in the world’73. The ‘fluidity’ and ‘unpredictability’ of cultural change are a function of the intrinsically creative process of ‘taking up’ a tradition of thought or cultural practice. Only a dialectical existentialism, argues Merleau-Ponty, could possibly do justice to this ambiguous structure of our lived experience. This is because it accounts for the way that we, as individuals, must make the cultural tradition in which we are raised ‘our own’ through the appropriation of its beliefs and practices – by ‘taking them up’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it. And because this ‘take up’ occurs at the individual level by an active participating subject, as opposed to a subject who is the passive receptacle of cultural tradition, it is, as Carman observes, an ‘intrinsically creative process’.

It is important to note here that when Merleau-Ponty deploys dialectics in order to account for cultural change, this dialectical historical change at the level of human culture is nevertheless underpinned by his more fundamental ontological categories (body-subject, being-in-the-world, also the object as an ‘in-itself-for-us’74). So, again, the dialectics are constrained by the existential phenomenology, forming an existential-dialectical conception of cultural change75. So Carman’s characterisation is not strictly speaking mistaken, but it is certainly far from complete in not articulating the way that the dialectical structure of cultural change rests on the

74 *Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception*, p.375.
75 Merleau-Ponty’s conception is not worked out in detail and basically consists of an attempt to transpose insights gained from the phenomenology of embodied perception and action into the realm of society and politics. As Taylor Carman has observed, Merleau-Ponty is not remembered for developing a new theory of history, society or politics: ‘What is new and interesting in his political writings is not their substantive theoretical content, but their attempt to extend phenomenological insights beyond the individual into the public sphere, beyond the personal realm of perceptual experience into the impersonal structures of collective action and social life’. Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, p.154
more fundamental existential-dialectical structures articulated in the categories of body-subject and being-in-the-world.

By not clearly identifying the three principal senses of ‘dialectic’ in Merleau-Ponty’s existential dialectic, all of these recent authors (Gardner, Priest, Russon, Carman, Dreyfus and Moran) fail to explain what Merleau-Ponty intends by employing a dialectical conception of reason and meaning in the service of articulating an existential ontology. As I have argued, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy involves three principle uses of ‘dialectic’. The first is his dialectic of objective thought which uses a dialectical form of argument to articulate the dialectical relation between the antinomial theoretical forms of Empiricism and Intellectualism, and their ‘overcoming’ in the phenomenology of pre-objective lived experience. Secondly, the exploration of the pre-objective leads to the formulation of existential-dialectical categories intended to capture the ontological structure of the ‘body-subject’ as ‘being-in-the-world’. And thirdly, the concrete situatedness of the subject in a cultural context is expressed in terms of a dialectic at the level of culture and history, a dialectic of cultural transmission and change as individuals modify their culture in the very process of reproducing it.

As we have seen, with respect to method Merleau-Ponty holds that dialectics is not only appropriate for phenomenological description but, more generally, a dialectical conception is built into an existentialist view of reason that is appropriate for ontological theorising. However, in spite of its Hegelian origin and general form, it should now be clear that Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist conception of reason is, as Herbert Spiegelberg points out, most definitely ‘not that of Hegelian logic which is
intelligible through and through and self-sufficient\textsuperscript{76}. Rather, in line with Merleau-Ponty’s inversion of priorities, the rational structure of the world, and thus what he considers a viable conception of reason, is understood to derive from the order and structure encountered in lived perceptual experience. Thus, if applied to Merleau-Ponty’s account, observes Spiegelberg, Hegel’s famous phrase would need to be reworked to read: ‘The real is only part rational and the rational is only part real’\textsuperscript{77}.

Consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s view that being always exceeds the capacities of reason, he speaks of a ‘mystery of reason’ and asserts that:

Rationality is precisely proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed. To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges\textsuperscript{78}.

This is clearly an ‘existentialised’ version of a Hegelian conception of reason. ‘For the first time’, Merleau-Ponty asserts, ‘the philosopher’s thinking is sufficiently conscious not to anticipate itself and endow its own results with reified form in the world’\textsuperscript{79}. The philosopher, on this conception, seeks to ‘conceive the world, others and himself and their interrelations’ but he does not ‘rediscover an already given rationality’. Rather, the world, others and self, and their interrelations ‘establish themselves’, and thus ‘establish rationality’, by:

\textsuperscript{76} Spiegelberg, \textit{The Phenomenological Movement}, p.534.  
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid}.  
\textsuperscript{78} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xxii.  
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid}.  

248
... an act of initiative which has no guarantee in being, its justification resting entirely on the effective power which it confers on us of taking our own history upon ourselves.\(^{80}\)

This helps to bring out the sense of Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{prima facie} opaque claim in the Preface that:

The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.\(^{81}\)

So truth is ‘brought into being’ in a similar way that an artwork is created. That is, it involves unique historical acts that represent a unique confluence of forces, and that is contingent upon the structure of human being and the structure of language and culture through which it is articulated. So it is ‘a laying down of being’ in the sense that rationality and truth do not simply ‘pre-exist’ our experience – there to be discovered. Rather, they are constituted through the subject in his co-constitutive relation with being. And if opponents raise the question as to ‘how this creation is possible’ and whether it ‘does not recapture in things a pre-existing Reason’, the answer is that:

\(^{80}\) \textit{Ibid.} cf: ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’ where he praises the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} because it ‘does not try to fit all history into a framework of pre-established logic but attempts to bring each doctrine and each era back to life and to let itself be guided by their internal logic...’ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p.65.

… the only pre-existent Logos is the world itself, and that the philosophy which brings it into visible existence does not begin by being possible; it is actual or real like the world of which it is a part\textsuperscript{82}.

Here we can see Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical conception of reason connect with his existentialist emphasis on a ‘phenomenological positivism which bases the possible on the real’\textsuperscript{83}. It is this unique combination of views that allows him to declare that:

Rationality is not a problem. There is behind it no unknown quantity which has to be determined by deduction, or, beginning with it, demonstrated inductively. We witness every minute the miracle of related experience, and yet nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of relationships. The world and reason are not problematical. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them …\textsuperscript{84}

Reason is not viewed as a problem for Merleau-Ponty precisely because he holds that ‘the sense of things must emerge from their own dynamism, and cannot be measured by some alien, pre-defined, static ‘reason’’\textsuperscript{85}. This dynamic, dialectical conception of reason is, in his view, the core of his Hegelian debt. As we have seen, Hegel was the first to ‘explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason’ and Merleau-Ponty ‘takes up’ this new model of ‘Reason, broader than the understanding’ that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Ibid. p.xix
  \item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid. p.xxiii.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Russon, ‘Dialectic, Difference and the Other’, p.21.
\end{itemize}
provides the philosopher with a rationality capable of respecting ‘the variety and singularity of individual consciousnesses, civilizations, ways of thinking, and historical contingency’\textsuperscript{86}. This dialectical conception of reason is, he holds, only brought to fruition in the context of existential phenomenology. This is because in the attempt to do justice to the singularity of nature and of embodied being, in all its richness and complexity, we discover that a new type of open-ended dialectic is required. This existential dialectic refuses Hegel’s totalising synthesis and, instead, centres on the three principal usages that we have identified in this chapter. For only this model of rationality is adequate to the task of capturing the dynamic structure of the pre-objective body/world relation, as well as the dynamic structure of reciprocal constitution between individual and cultural context.

6. Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty’s use of dialectics is such that the term itself, like that of ‘transcendentalism’, can be very misleading to interpreters of his position if we fail to grasp the way in which his usage is distinct from Hegel’s. The incorporation of dialectics as a means to articulate his view of the lived body-subject as finite, historical and situated decisively transforms the meaning of dialectics from its original Hegelian conception. For Hegel history is understood as the realisation of reason, and individual historical events are viewed as expressing logical relations between ideas. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, understands history as an open-ended

\textsuperscript{86} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p.63.
process that is without any intrinsic direction. This is because he understands historical events and processes as being grounded in the concrete historicity of lived individuals, and those individuals always have the creative capacity to reinterpret their history and their present situation and thus the freedom to redirect their future course.

This discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of dialectics has helped to form a fuller picture of his philosophical position by distinguishing his conception of existential dialectics from Hegel’s idealist dialectics. This has been achieved through a reconstruction of the rationale of Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation and by providing an account of the three core senses that the term has for him. I have also, by identifying the inadequate treatment this aspect of his thought has received in recent Anglophone Merleau-Ponty scholarship, suggested the way to avoid potential misunderstandings. As we saw, many recent authors have given either inaccurate or incomplete accounts as a result of missing the full scope and originality of Merleau-Ponty’s usage of the term. They failed to articulate 1) the way in which the ‘dialectic of objective thought’ relates to his existential-dialectical categories (body-subject, being-in-the-world), and 2) the way in which his dialectic at the cultural level concerning others and history is distinguishable from, though underpinned by, the existential dialectic of ‘consciousness’ and ‘body’ in the ‘body-subject’, and ‘body’ and ‘world’ in ‘being-in-the-world’.

We have now completed the second step of the three-step argumentative trajectory of the thesis. The first step consisted of a critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate raised by the uses of Merleau-Ponty in
‘post-cognitivist’ cognitive science. As we saw in Chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty would hold that the scientistic use to which his work has recently been put fails to grasp the philosophical significance of his phenomenological account. In attempting, in the previous chapter and in the present one, to more accurately articulate this philosophical significance I have completed the second step of the argument. This step involved a critique of recent claims regarding Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method, his transcendentalism and his use of dialectics. In place of these mistaken claims I have presented a more accurate, better textually grounded, interpretation of his philosophical position and method. As we saw in Chapter 3, recent claims that Merleau-Ponty is ‘a new kind of transcendental idealist’ are mistaken. This is because his existential phenomenology involves a methodological transcendentalism that is anti-realist but not transcendental idealist, due to his rejection of metaphysical transcendentalism. In this chapter I have shown how recent Merleau-Ponty scholarship has failed to come to grips with his appropriation of the concept of dialectics. Critiquing recent inadequate or incomplete interpretations, I have pointed out the unique way in which Merleau-Ponty combines the concept of ‘dialectics’ within the frame of his existential ontology. He does this in order to articulate the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the lived world that the phenomenology of perceptual experience reveals.

The general exegesis contained in chapters 1 and 2, coupled with the critique and clarificatory interpretation contained mostly in chapters 3 and 4, has placed us in a position to address the third step of my argument. This step involves a consideration of some problems attending Merleau-Ponty’s central thesis of ‘the primacy of perception’. In this last step I point out some serious difficulties with
Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception and suggest a response, in order to overcome these difficulties, that retains the core of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the lived body. These problems, and the response to them, will be my concern in the final chapter.
Chapter 5: A Critical Conclusion

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I completed the second step of my three-step argument. In the first step I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position refuses the possibility of ‘naturalisation’, as conceived in the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate. He does this because that type of ‘naturalisation’ involves the explicit or implicit advocacy of a scientific realist ontology – which he holds to be premised on a philosophical mistake. Instead, he holds that the true philosophical import of the phenomenological study of perception is captured by his existential ontology. The second step addressed the question of the correct interpretation of this philosophical position, focusing on three key areas of his philosophy that have been prone to misunderstandings in the recent literature: his phenomenological method, his transcendentalism and his use of dialectics. Critiquing recent claims that have fallen short of an accurate account of these themes, I argued that Merleau-Ponty holds a unique liberal naturalist position that uses a transcendental methodology to articulate \textit{a priori} structures of being. He expresses the nature of these existential structures by appropriating the concept of dialectics for his model of rationality and meaning through which he articulates his existential ontology. And he does this in order to articulate the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the lived world that the phenomenology of perceptual experience reveals. The third and final step of my three-step argument is the subject of the present chapter. This step involves a critical analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s central thesis of ‘the primacy of perception’. Drawing
on lines of critique expressed by Vincent Descombes, Jean Francois Lyotard, Michael Kullman and Charles Taylor and, principally, by Joseph Margolis, I will point out some serious problems with Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception that are bound up with his conception of the language/perception relation. I will go on to suggest their implications for Merleau-Ponty’s theory and, lastly, propose a response that would overcome these difficulties and retain the core of Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the lived body and the body-world relation.

In section 2 of the present chapter I discuss Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception in relation to his conception of three levels of experience, emphasising the distinction between the ‘pre-predicative world’ of the ‘lived body’ and the lived world of everyday experience – the ‘lifeworld’. I also describe his view of the language/perception relation. I argue in section 3 that Merleau-Ponty faces a significant problem due to his conception of the language/perception relation, which is connected to the fact that he does not fully acknowledge the hermeneutic nature of his method in Phenomenology of Perception. I go on to explicate Heidegger’s conception of the hermeneutic structure of experience in order to suggest the role of language in the constitution of meaning. In section 4 I contend that Merleau-Ponty does not see the full significance of the deep linguistic context that is the enabling and conditioning background through which phenomenological description necessarily takes place.

In section 5 I go on to propose that we can engage in a phenomenology of the pre-predicative level in a way that the results of our inquiry can contribute to our epistemological and ontological claims. However, the understanding that we achieve
of the pre-personal level is not capable of serving as the epistemological foundation of the level of both the objective world of scientific discourse and the lifeworld of personal thought and action. And so I suggest that Merleau-Ponty is operating with an unjustified thesis to the effect that his account of the pre-personal world has a distinct and foundational epistemic status, as it is a discourse on the ‘originary’\(^1\), as opposed to the ‘second order expression’ of scientific discourse. It is exceedingly difficult, I argue, to see how it is the pre-predicative world that is being characterised, rather than the pre-predicative as pre-interpreted through a contextualising linguistic-cultural lifeworld.

In section 6 I draw out the implications of my critique for Merleau-Ponty’s existential ontology. The central consequence being, as Margolis has argued, that Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the philosophical significance of the pre-predicative as ‘originary origin’\(^2\) is compromised. Attention to the constitutive role of language indicates the need for a revised conception of the ‘originary’. This revised conception retains the status of an ‘incompletely penetrable precondition’\(^3\). However, in encountering the pre-objective we are not thereby encountering the pre-

---

\(^1\) Husserl uses the adjectival ‘originary’ as a modifier for ‘givenness’. In his discussion of perception he talks of an ‘originary givenness’ meaning ‘that which is given intuitively, given with intuitive content’. Merleau-Ponty talks of the ‘primordial’ or ‘primary’ level. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he advocates ‘a phenomenology of origins’ that, unlike ‘classical science’ which ‘loses sight of its origins’, explicates the way in which pre-predicative perception is an ‘original source’, thus making clear the nature of this originary level of experience and its philosophical implications. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.12.


predicative ‘antior to all traditions’⁴ – but rather, encountering ‘a languaged world’ via a ‘worlded language’⁵.

I also argue that, despite removing the objectivism that grows out of the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction does not and cannot remove the fact of our necessary situatedness in a received natural language tradition. It is the primary status of this ordinary language form of discourse that Merleau-Ponty overlooks in his view of the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order. Further, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s concretised plurality of body-subjects, coupled with the argument regarding the deep hermeneutic-linguistic context of lived experience, undermines the notion of a singular lifeworld that he tacitly assumes in Phenomenology of Perception. I contend that, as Margolis observes, this view ought to be ‘replaced by plural, variable, historicized, open, potentially incommensurable lifeworlds’⁶.

I conclude this section by arguing that my critique suggests grounds for adopting a revised version of Merleau-Ponty’s position. This revised position involves a full acknowledgement of his method as a hermeneutic phenomenology and a revision of his claims about the discourse of the pre-predicative as first order. Although this revised account retains his insights about the lived body, perception and the necessary situatedness of the subject, the problems with his thesis of the primacy of perception seem to necessitate the rejection of the idea of an account of the pre-predicative as capable of serving as epistemological ground. So I argue that

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.208.
⁶ Ibid, p. 175.
despite the fact that he sees this as central to his conception of existential ontology, it is hard to see how Merleau-Ponty can avoid this consequence.

Finally, in the last section, I provide a conclusory summary of the findings of the thesis as a whole and suggest their implications for contemporary epistemology and ontology.

2. Merleau-Ponty’s Thesis of the Primacy of Perception

The general thesis that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the ‘primacy of perception’ is the central theoretical claim of *Phenomenology of Perception*. As we have seen, this claim asserts the *epistemological* primacy of perception – in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological sense of perception – and the *ontological* primacy of phenomena. There is an inherent plausibility to the idea that a close examination of the content and structure of perception ought to provide the ground for our knowledge claims. And, therefore, that a phenomenology that seeks an articulation of the ‘primordial’ level of experience will provide us with an epistemic ground from which we will be able to go on to articulate a viable ontology.

The general thesis also contains a semantic dimension that holds that the meaning contained in language is ultimately derivative upon the meaning inherent in pre-predicative, pre-personal perceptual experience. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

… to perceive in the full sense of the word … is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins. The
phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgement is merely the optional expression\textsuperscript{7}.

So the meaning expressed in any predicative judgement must be derivative upon the ‘immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins’. And so it is the case that in a predicative judgement:

\dots every one of these words, like every equation in physics, presupposes our pre-scientific experience of the world, and this reference to the world in which we \textit{live} goes to make up the proposition’s valid meaning\textsuperscript{8}.

It is this semantic dimension that causes problems at the epistemological level that reverberate through all the other dimensions of the primacy of perception thesis.

In \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} Merleau-Ponty argues that we are open to a social world of linguistic and cultural meaning via our embodied perception, and that this secondary level of meaning has its roots in the primary level and ultimate source of significance, the pre-personal, pre-predicative world of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty understands three levels of experience, or three ‘worlds’\textsuperscript{9}:

1. The ‘pre-personal world’ of the ‘lived body’.

2. The lived world of everyday experience – the ‘life-world’.

\textsuperscript{7} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.40.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid.}, p.502.

\textsuperscript{9} To quote the title of an important article by Hubert Dreyfus and Samuel Todes. See: Hubert Dreyfus and Samuel Todes, ‘The Three Worlds of Merleau-Ponty’, \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} 22 (1962), pp.559-565.
3. The objective world of scientific discourse – the ‘universe’.

Previous chapters have covered what the meaning of 3. *The objective world of scientific discourse*\(^\text{10}\) is, but a brief clarification of the distinction between 1. and 2. is in order.

By 1. *The ‘pre-personal world’ of the ‘lived body’* Merleau-Ponty means the most basic level of perceptual meaning. This kind of meaning shows up in the way that in moving about in the world one bodily apprehends the meaning of a situation. For example, when walking in the woods we pre-reflectively grasp both the significance of the general context of our experiential world – the background – as well as the distinct figures that come to be determinately foregrounded against this background and then recede back into indeterminacy as we continue on our way. This bodily apprehension, Merleau-Ponty suggests, is the basis of us ‘having a world’, ‘a collection of things which emerge from a background of formlessness by presenting themselves to our body as “to be touched”, “to be taken”, “to be climbed over”’\(^\text{11}\). Things, for example, like a rock that we encounter on our path, which we pre-reflectively comprehend as something that we have the capacity to pick up and throw or to climb over. And if we think about the case of basic motor skill acquisition, such as the learned skill of throwing a rock, this motor skill shows up perceptually as ‘affordances’, i.e. we don’t just perceive a rock that we encounter as an object pure and simple, rather the rock is *perceived as affording picking up and throwing*.

---

\(^{10}\) See: Introduction, pp.2-3, Chapter 1, pp.5-7.

\(^{11}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.512.
We can also see this by the way that our apprehension of the world in terms of affordances can be interrupted. For example, when our body is surprised by certain phenomena that do not cohere with the anticipatory structure contained in the pattern of our movement, the way in which we have a tacit understanding of the perceptual situation is thereby revealed. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

If, on a sunken path, I think I can see, some distance away, a broad, flat stone on the ground, which is in reality a patch of sunlight ... I see the illusory 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\(^{12}\).

But if our perceptual and motor field apprehends the meaning of the situation as ‘stone on the path’ right up to the moment when we step on it, then we will stumble, be surprised and have to hastily recomport ourself to the situation. This stumbling and surprise indicates that at the pre-personal bodily level we grasp the meaning of our environmental situation and the objects within it through a basic pre-personal understanding, an understanding that we live.

By 2, *The lived world of everyday experience, or ‘lifeworld’*, Merleau-Ponty means the secondary level of personal meaning of our everyday experience and action. This lived world of meaningful personal experience is built upon the pre-personal meaningful world of the lived body. Meaning at the personal level of the lifeworld is understood to feed back into the pre-personal perceptual level shaping

\(^{12}\text{Ibid. p.346.}\)
how things perceptually appear to us. For example, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, our ‘cultural’ projects ‘polarize the phenomenal field’ with ‘lines of force’. That is, complex cultural skill acquisition shows up in the way that we perceive situations in terms of our projects. To adapt an example from Jean Paul Sartre, when we are expecting to meet a friend in the café and we arrive and they are not there, we don’t just see the perceptual scene of the café as raw perceptual experience, rather we perceive the café as the café absent our friend. And at the most general level we don’t perceive people’s actions as simply a series of sequential occurrences but rather as meaningful and purposeful behaviour in the service of individual and social ends.

Connected to the process of having one’s field perceptually shaped by cultural projects, indeed that which makes cultural projects possible, is what Merleau-Ponty discusses in terms of ‘reflection’. Reflection involves a process of linguistic expression that ‘folds back’ onto perception, contributing to a further articulation of the pre-reflective lived perceptual meaning. This process of reflection facilitates a more coherent, clear and accurate, and thus comprehensive, understanding of the phenomena, using language to express its ‘core of primary meaning’ – ‘the primary meaning of discourse’ that is ‘found in [the] text of experience which it is trying to communicate’\(^\odot\).

Through the concreteness of its approach, Merleau-Ponty argues, his existential phenomenology, even when performing the most abstract of acts of thought in seeking ‘essences’ via \textit{eidetic} reflection, is nevertheless ‘destined to bring

\(^\odot\) \textit{Ibid.} p.393.
back all the living relationships of experience. This *eidetic* reflective process has its origins in, and concerns the content of, the lifeworld. However, when theoretical thinking is performed within the natural attitude, it ignores its lifeworld basis and takes part in an ongoing sedimentation of meaning that is built on attributing to the phenomenal contents of experience the ‘absolute existence of the object’. This ‘dream of an absolute objectivity’, a process which ‘congeals the whole of existence’, is what constitutes 3) *The objective world of scientific discourse – the objectivist ‘universe’ of science.*

When discussing the language/perception relation and its relation to a philosophical reflection on essences, Merleau-Ponty says:

> It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent, since through language they still rest upon the antepredicative life of consciousness. In the *silence of primary consciousness* can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the *core of primary meaning* round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.

---

15 See Chapter 3, p.194 n.71.
16 *Ibid.* p.237. And, as we saw in Chapter 1, this is a result of the process intrinsic to perception itself.
18 *Ibid.* p.82.
It is Merleau-Ponty’s view that without the opening of embodied individual existence, ‘a first opening upon things’\textsuperscript{20}, the natural and social world simply would not appear. And it is the pre-predicative and pre-personal perceived world that represents the ‘primordial’ level. Thus, it is through the lived body that the meaningful public field of nature and society is opened up for us. It is because of this ‘two-way’ \textit{Fundierung} relation (a relation of ‘founding’ to ‘founded’) that Merleau-Ponty views the ‘acts of naming and expression’ at the cultural-linguistic level of discourse as ‘taking shape’ around the ‘core of primary meaning’ that ultimately resides in ‘the silence of primary consciousness’, the pre-personal, pre-predicative – hence silent – ‘world’ of bodily perception.

The cultural/linguistic meanings that themselves play a role in shaping the meaning of our lived perceptual experience are nevertheless said to have their ultimate source in a process that is a sort of linguistic ‘sublimation’\textsuperscript{21} of our embodied perceptual encounter with the world. For Merleau-Ponty holds, as the semantic dimension of his thesis of the ‘primacy of perception’, the view that linguistic/cultural significations ultimately derive their meaning from the primary source of meaning in the concrete situated experience of the lived body: the ‘core of primary meaning’ encountered in the ‘antepredicative life of consciousness’. This semantic dimension of the primacy of perception thesis is coupled with a view of language that holds that it is the role of language to represent, not a subject-independent objective world, but rather the phenomenological ‘perceived world’.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.} p.111.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.} p.146.
Merleau-Ponty understands the relation between perception and language as dialectical in the sense that the constitution of meaning that is initiated in perception is a movement that is incomplete unless that meaning is ‘taken up’ in reflection. Thus perceptual meaning depends on linguistic meaning in order to be fully realised as meaning. And, likewise, reflection can only ‘take up’ its linguistic meanings as meanings rooted in perceptual experience, thus linguistic meanings are dependent on the perceptual ground to be the kind of meanings that they are. He also views the relation in terms of a ‘double envelopment’ model. On this view, perception envelops language in the sense that it provides the perceptual field about which language speaks, a field that always exceeds the significations of language. Thus it ‘envelops’ them with an open and horizontal meaningful field that is indeterminate yet infinitely determinable. However, language envelops the perceived world in the sense that it tries to conceptually ‘envelop’ it in its movement towards the most general claims about the essential nature of objects, events and the world in general, of which our most basic encounter is perceptual. Thus ‘enveloping’ reflection is vital in that through it we grasp the meaning of the perceived more clearly and more fully.

It is certainly true that, as regards the question of the relationship between perception and language, Merleau-Ponty privileges perception through his thesis of the primacy of perception (in its epistemological, ontological and semantic dimensions). He wants to broadly characterise the language/perception relation on his model of the basic structure of perceptual experience as a movement from indeterminacy to greater determinacy. Linguistic expression forms part of this process as the ‘taking up’ of perceptual meaning explicitly in language furthers the movement toward greater determinacy arising out of lesser determinacy.
3. The Language/Perception Relation and the Hermeneutic Structure of Experience: Heidegger, Gadamer and the Role of Language in the Constitution of Meaning

Despite the many insights to be gleaned in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to language he has not fully worked out his theory of language in the period under discussion\textsuperscript{22}, and this unclarity leads to some difficulties for his position. The problems in the area of a theory of language and of the language/perception relation lead to, and are bound up with, a lack of clarity with respect to method in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}. Basically, there is insufficient acknowledgement of both the general hermeneutic nature of his method and of the specific way in which this hermeneutic depth is at work in the text. The problem can be seen in the way that Merleau-Ponty’s methodological statements in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} focus too much on the phenomenological description of embodied perception, emphasising both the role of the body schema (the perspectivality of perception, its figure/ground structure) and the fundamental role of pre-personal bodily meaning in our understanding of the world, whilst downplaying the cultural/linguistic context that pervades and shapes our perceptual experience.

In not satisfactorily working out his position on the perception/language relation and operating with a view of discourse as representing lived experience,

\textsuperscript{22} Merleau-Ponty was already moving in the direction of an incorporation of Saussurian linguistics in \textit{Signs}, and developed this further in the work of the College de France period (1952-1961). However, this period is outside the scope of my study.
Merleau-Ponty failed to make clear how this relates to the structuring role of deep linguistic/cultural contexts that shape our perceptual experience – contexts that his view of human existence as fundamentally social and historical arguably entail. He asserts that the level of the pre-personal and pre-predicative is fundamental, for example:

Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks this silence.\(^{23}\)

But he does not properly explain how this level relates to the deep hermeneutic context that shapes our perception as a culturally pre-interpreted ‘seeing as’ – what Heidegger called a ‘fore-structure’ of understanding.\(^{24}\) Let us explicate Heidegger’s concept of the hermeneutic structure of experience.

There is an essential connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics in that both are concerned with describing the process by which meaning emerges. And it is Heidegger’s theory of understanding that establishes the basis for a ‘hermeneutic turn’ in philosophy. This theory greatly influences Merleau-Ponty’s account of our basic pre-cognitive, pre-reflective grasp of our meaningful situation. In perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty argues, we encounter the world as always already meaningful in a non-explicit and tacit way. This pre-reflective understanding


and meaning, as we have seen, does not primarily consist of intellectual and linguistic acts. Rather, it involves our practical bodily engagement with the world. We interactively cope with the objects and situations we encounter in the world based on our pre-reflective grasp of their meaning. We show our pre-reflective bodily ‘understanding’ by negotiating our way through our environment and using objects for purposes in a non-reflective but nonetheless comprehending way.

Part of the characterisation of pre-reflective intentionality in terms of being-in-the-world, on Heidegger’s account, involves the incorporation of an explicit methodological understanding of phenomenological description as necessarily occurring in the context of a hermeneutical analysis that is grounded in our rich, tacit ‘pre-understanding’ of the world. Heidegger radically reinterprets ‘understanding’ from a species of human cognition to the primordial mode of Dasein’s being.25

Recall that Dasein is Heidegger’s term for the unique kind of being that human beings have. Heidegger claims that understanding is a basic mode of Dasein’s being and that the traditional conception of ‘the understanding’ is derived from understanding as the existential awareness of possibilities. ‘With the term ‘understanding’, he says:

… we have in mind a fundamental existentiale, which is neither a definite species of cognition distinguished, let us say, from explaining and

25 Traditional philosophy takes understanding to be one of the major cognitive abilities of the subject and conceives the issue of understanding through the lens of the problem of knowledge – as, for example, in Kant’s discussion of ‘the understanding’ in Critique of Pure Reason.
conceiving, nor any cognition at all in the sense of grasping something thematically.\(^\text{26}\)

As a core part of this view Heidegger’s method involves what he calls a ‘hermeneutics of facticity’. This is because in experiencing ourselves as always necessarily situated in a concrete situation, we find that if we ask the question about the origin of the ‘factual’ situation that we find ourselves in, we need to explore the way in which the meaning that we are currently experiencing has developed. And this is a process of historical sedimentation that we need an interpretative method to, as it were, peel back the layers of meaning that structure what, from a Husserlian perspective of ‘pure description’, strikes us as simply there, as simply given. In this way hermeneutics displaces phenomenology as the core of his philosophical method. Phenomenology as description is not abandoned, however, but rather resituated within his interpretative method.

For Heidegger, hermeneutics deals with human existence as ‘text-analogous’ – that is, as ‘a meaningful text for which we uncover its underlying meaning’. Thus, Heidegger’s conception of an ‘existential phenomenology’\(^\text{27}\) is tied to the idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’. For Heidegger, all understanding and questioning operates within a ‘hermeneutic circle’.\(^\text{28}\) The idea is that it starts with the assumptions of everyday understanding and then proceeds to a level of philosophical awareness where these tacit assumptions may be made explicit and analysed. His interpretative practice is circular because, as Dermot Moran succinctly puts it:

\(^{26}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 182.

\(^{27}\) A term which, for him, is synonymous with ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’.

… in order to pose an intelligent question, something about the nature of the subject matter of the question must already be understood. There can be no questions arising from pure ignorance. But the answers to the questions force us to revise the presuppositions with which we began. There is thus a ‘circle’, but not a vicious circle\textsuperscript{29}.

For Heidegger this circle is not a contingent feature of understanding, but is essential to human being as being-in-the-world\textsuperscript{30}. So the circle ‘belongs to the structure of meaning, and the latter phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of \textit{Dasein}\textsuperscript{31}.

Heidegger holds that interpretation has a ‘fore-structure’, which involves what he calls ‘fore-sight’ – that is, a tentative grasp on the direction of enquiry involving a ‘preliminary look’ and a ‘fore-conception’. His theoretical strategy, as Robert D’Amico puts it, is that ‘discourse, understood ontologically, makes the fore-structure explicit and thereby makes explicit the question of Being\textsuperscript{32}. Though the whole effort is reflective and circular, it is not viciously so:

… the project makes explicit, by this reflective effort, the structure of ‘making intelligible’. Though admittedly the project is not possible without

\textsuperscript{29} Moran, \textit{Introduction to Phenomenology}, p.276.
\textsuperscript{30} ‘An entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure’. Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, p.195.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid}.
some preliminary projection, this pattern of reflective circularity … serves to enrich inquiry …

Because all inquiry and justification is contextualised by a pre-understanding rooted in tradition and culture, the hermeneutic circle is a fundamental feature of all human activities. This is why his ‘circle of human understanding’ is a structural feature of human existence and his hermeneutic practice is ontological – seeking to reveal the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes. Again, the practice of phenomenology is not abandoned in this method. This is because it is the best way to properly access and describe the experience of understanding itself.

For Heidegger, Being is ‘disclosed’ through understanding as pre-philosophical yet pre-interpreted (in Merleau-Ponty’s version of this claim being is disclosed through our lived perception). All instances of understanding, including perception, are conditioned by a prior projection of definite possibilities upon the world. Working out the possibilities projected in understanding is interpretation. So, through interpretation, philosophy seeks the intelligibility that is projected in understanding, in sharp contrast to the explanatory scope characteristic of the sciences. Heideggerean ‘fundamental ontology’, then, involves a back-and-forth movement between a pre-understanding of Being and the uncovering of the structural features of Dasein. As Hans-Georg Gadamer later characterises it:

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
In contrast to the mere givenness of the phenomena of objective consciousness, a givenness in intentional experiences, this reflection constitutes a new dimension of research. For there is such a thing as givenness that is not itself the object of intentional acts. Every experience has implicit horizons of before and after, and finally fuses with the continuum of the experiences present in the before and after to form a unified flow of experience\textsuperscript{34}.

This givenness is not an ‘object of intentional acts’ but rather structures those acts as enabling and conditioning them, making them possible. It is thus present in each act in this sense, the sense of the background, though not in the sense of ‘the mere givenness of the phenomena’.

Unlike the Husserlian attempt to reflect on meaning via an attempted suspension of all prejudgement (presuppositionlessness), the interpretative approach seeks to defend the priority and irremovability of prejudgment. There is no raw uninterpreted given, nothing is ‘there’ without anticipations. So the idea is that any experience we have – and this includes perception – is pre-structured as a result of the intrinsic fundamentally intersubjective nature of our existence. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty argues in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, we are fundamentally social beings. And as social beings we are always and irremovably situated as part of a

historical tradition – a tradition that ‘fore-structures’ our basic pre-theoretical grasp of the world\cite{Gadamer}.

Our everyday thinking and action is shaped by these cultural traditions of meaning as the basis of our making sense of who we are and what the world is. As such, Heidegger argues that a phenomenological approach must inevitably come to include a critical analysis of foundational traditional concepts as the logical development of a descriptive account of the phenomena and an *eidetic* reflection on its essential structure. This is because our inquiry must inevitably start with our traditional understanding of Being, which is structured through the practices and language of our culture. In connection with this, Heidegger discusses the category of ‘discourse’, which he characterises as an existential structure that ‘articulates intelligibility’. Discourse articulates ‘whatever is intelligible about the world through communication, which, as an ontological concept, is more than the transmission of information. Communication is *Dasein’s* being in the world\cite{D’Amico}.

Basic empirical statements about the world have this complex fore-structure. As a result they contain the possibility of fundamental ontology, that is an interpretation as to the Being that makes possible our encounters with everyday objects and events in the natural attitude. When phenomenologists perform the *epoché* and reduction – although these are not Heidegger’s terms – they are still, in their descriptive discourse, drawing on language that is shaped by this complex fore-structure.

---

\textsuperscript{35} Cf: Gadamer: In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live … That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being’. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.276-277.

\textsuperscript{36} D’Amico, *Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, p.175.
structure. As Heidegger argues, the way in which a statement points out can only function on the basis of ‘what is already disclosed in understanding or discovered circumspectively’\(^{37}\). Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are in agreement that ‘the statement is not an unattached kind of behaviour which could of itself primarily disclose beings in general’ but rather ‘maintains itself on the basis of being-in-the-world’\(^{38}\). However, Heidegger is clearer on the role of the fore-conception as conditioning any descriptive (or interpretive) statement. As Heidegger argues, the fore-conception always contained in the statement ‘remains for the most part inconspicuous, because … language already hides in itself a developed way of conceiving’ – a developed set of concepts. Like interpretation in general, the statement ‘necessarily has a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception as its existential foundations’\(^{39}\).

### 4. Merleau-Ponty and the Deep Hermeneutic Context of Perceptual Experience

One way to highlight the closeness of Merleau-Ponty’s view to Heidegger’s is by looking at his use of the concept of ‘facticity’\(^{40}\). Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of ‘facticity’ to his existential phenomenology in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This can be seen, for example, in his general view that one cannot ‘comprehend man and the world except from the point of view of [the] “facticity”’ in

---


\(^{38}\) *Ibid*.

\(^{39}\) *Ibid*.

\(^{40}\) Recall that facticity refers to the concrete givenness of situations, in contrast to what we can voluntarily control or grasp in thought.
which human existence is unreflectively caught up⁴¹. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of facticity powerfully implicates the role of the cultural and historical in the constitution of the factual world in which we are always already situated. Merleau-Ponty emphasises this from the point of view of bodily perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* but doesn’t articulate the full significance of the culturally and historically situated body-subject that follows from his view of the fundamental sociality of human existence.

Merleau-Ponty certainly concurs with Heidegger’s claim that ‘humans are essentially involved in the historically situated and finite task of understanding the world’ but he does not see the full significance of the way that this world ‘is encountered and inhabited in and through language’⁴². For if language fulfils the realisation of meaning – as in the meaningful movement from perceptual indeterminacy to relative perceptual determinacy, and through the ‘taking up’ of perceptual meaning in language to further express and make explicit the meaning contained in the pre-reflective lived – then ‘language is the medium in which understanding is realised’⁴³. And so language must in a certain sense ‘both precede and encompass human experience’⁴⁴.

This language that ‘precedes’ and ‘encompasses’ our lived experience is the medium through which human culture finds expression. And so, in Dermot Moran’s words, it can:

---

⁴¹ cf. his claim that ‘there is not one truth of reason which does not retain its coefficient of facticity’. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.458.
… never be completely neutral, never a simple window on experience.
Rather, language is already coloured with the value system of the culture which supports it and which language in turn vivifies. In that sense, we can never see through language or surpass it\textsuperscript{45}.

Thus any putatively descriptive discourse in a phenomenological investigation necessarily brings with it a whole set of cultural assumptions that are built into the practitioner’s linguistic inheritance.

We do not construct the concepts that we employ in a phenomenological description; rather, they are inherited within the context of a living historical tradition. As Gadamer has observed, ‘philosophizing does not begin at some zero point but must think and speak with the language we already possess’\textsuperscript{46}. In this sense:

… the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [i.e. prejudgements], constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something\textsuperscript{47}.

As a result, our pre-reflective understanding is ‘essentially enabled and conditioned by our prejudgements’ and therefore must be ‘limited by the overall ’horizons’ of our outlook’\textsuperscript{48}. The hermeneutic approach, then, makes explicit and self-conscious the

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. p.270.
\textsuperscript{48} Moran, \textit{Introduction to Phenomenology}, p.252.
features of interpretative understanding that are normally presupposed and implicit. And in the case of perception this means that rather than give a descriptive account of the given, it explains the genesis of the phenomenological given as a result of the ontological structure of the circle of understanding.

So, as Gadamer argues, this hermeneutic dimension to both perceptual and linguistic experience suggests that ‘the “object” to which we relate, and which we seek to know, is always wrapped around by the history of its significance for us’. But if every ‘object’ is wrapped around by the history of its significance for us then Merleau-Ponty’s project of ‘re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world’, and of ‘endowing that contact with a philosophical status’, confronts a serious difficulty.

Merleau-Ponty’s rhetoric of the pre-personal processes of the lived body as ‘primordial’ (‘primary’ ‘primitive’), coupled with his rhetoric of description as the heart of his method in the Preface to Phenomenology of Perception, gives the reader the impression that he holds that it is the description of pre-reflective perceptual experience that is the central philosophical task, and that everything falls out of this descriptive process. This is true in a certain sense, in as much as if you start with the descriptive procedure you must logically move to an interpretative procedure if you raise the question of being/origin of meaning. However it fails to acknowledge what has already fallen out of the phenomenology of embodied perception and what Merleau-Ponty is already utilising in Phenomenology of Perception. Namely, the

50 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p.vii (italics added).
51 cf. in this regard his talk of ‘phenomenological positivism’, Ibid. p.xix.
deep linguistic contexts (horizons) opened up as the enabling and conditioning background through which phenomenological description necessarily takes place, and the hermeneutic turn necessitated as the descriptive method hits up against the interpretive horizon that makes possible any descriptive claims.

Now it is certainly the case that Merleau-Ponty’s views profoundly anticipate the later interpretive turn in phenomenology as he is already utilising themes that are central to it. For example, he emphasises issues of language and intersubjectivity in his struggle to reconceive the Husserlian philosophy of transcendental consciousness in a way that rejects the view that they are secondary phenomena. And he argues instead for their centrality to what it means to be a thinking, personal subject\(^{52}\). However, Merleau-Ponty’s ‘rhetoric of description’ coupled with his methodological discussion in *Phenomenology of Perception*\(^{53}\) indicate that he is not fully clear about the hermeneutical depth already at work in his philosophical practice, and its implications for his account of perception and the ontology that he wishes to build from it.

In the Preface Merleau-Ponty briefly discusses the role of interpretation and understanding as part of his method. For example he says that:

> Whether we are concerned with a thing perceived, a historical event or a doctrine, to *understand* is to *take in the total intention*—not only what these things are for representation (the ‘properties’ of the thing perceived, the mass of ‘historical facts’, the ‘ideas’ introduced by the doctrine)—but the *unique*

\(^{52}\) For a clear discussion of this see: G. B. Madison, ‘The Interpretive Turn in Phenomenology: A Philosophical History’, in *Symposium*, 8 (2) (Summer 2004).

\(^{53}\) Also in Merleau-Ponty, ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’.
"mode of existing" expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass or the piece of wax, in all the events of a revolution, in all the thoughts of a philosopher\textsuperscript{54}.

So in ‘understanding’ we ‘take in’ the ‘unique mode of existing’ which we apprehend in a ‘total intention’ that is the ground of any predicative ‘representation’ that we form of it.

With respect to ‘the understanding of history’, he asserts, we ‘must seek an understanding from [multiple] angles [e.g. ‘ideology’, ‘politics’, ‘religion’, ‘economics’] simultaneously’. And because ‘… everything has meaning … we shall find th[e] same structure of being underlying all relationships’ All of ‘these views’, he says, ‘have their truth’ provided that ‘they are not isolated’ and ‘that we delve deeply into history and reach the unique core of existential meaning which emerges in each perspective’\textsuperscript{55}. However the discussion of his method in the Preface and in ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’, as well as his framing of it in terms of the phenomenological reduction and \textit{eidetic} analysis, give the impression that the descriptive phenomenology is sufficiently distinct from, and prior to, the existential interpretation\textsuperscript{56}. Thus, he suggests a distinction between description and interpretation that the actual practice of his existential-hermeneutic performatively undermines.

\textsuperscript{54} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xx (italics added).
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.} p.xxi (italics added).
\textsuperscript{56} This impression is also contributed to by his sequential presentation, whereby we start with ‘familiarising of ourselves with the phenomenal field’ and then move to take up a transcendental perspective on phenomenological psychology in order to draw out the ontological significance of the phenomenology of perceptual experience.
Now, if he were simply giving an account of the historical genesis of existential interpretation he would be on solid ground. But the problem is that the Preface is ambiguous between a description of the genesis of existential interpretation and a description of his method in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the body of the text he performatively undermines his ‘rhetoric of description’ by the fact that all the ‘description of experience’ undertaken in *Phenomenology of Perception* is undertaken within an existential-hermeneutic framework indicating that the he is closer to Heidegger than his explicit methodological statements indicate. His ‘phenomenology’ is already in that sense fully situated within an existential-hermeneutic framework. So the problem is that, in incorporating Heideggerean existential ontology (e.g. ‘This facticity of the world is what constitutes the *Weltlichkeit der Welt*, what causes the world to be the world’\(^{57}\)), Merleau-Ponty is also incorporating Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutics of facticity’ without fully grasping its implications for a phenomenological account of perception. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s methodology in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not entirely self-transparent as it does not properly explicate its practice with respect to the description-interpretation relation. He has incorporated the core of the ‘hermeneutics of facticity’ in his practice of ‘existential interpretation’ in *Phenomenology of Perception* but that results in an inconsistency between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical practice in the body of the text and the programmatic and methodological Preface in as much as he gives the reader the impression that his method is at base descriptive in that text.

\(^{57}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.xix.
In the section where he explicitly discusses his transcendental method in the context of a discussion of the phenomenal field (discussed in Chapter 3), as well as in the essay ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’, he is still emphasising the description of the content and structures of experience, coupled with an *eidetic* reflection that seeks to articulate the ‘essences’, the essential structures of the phenomena. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he discusses a shift to a perspective that seeks to account for ‘the phenomenon of the phenomenon’ (i.e. what makes the phenomenal field as such possible), but we don’t get much more detail than that. In his discussion of *eidetic* analysis in ‘Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man’ he also emphasises the technique of imaginative variation\(^ {58}\). But in neither of those accounts does he provide a substantive discussion of the structure and function of the interpretative process (and any attendant problems) in relation to the two phases of his method (descriptive and ‘*eidetic*’).

Overall, Merleau-Ponty fails to account for the way in which description of pre-predicative perceptual experience is itself undertaken within a cultural-linguistic framework and hence is in no sense a straightforward ‘speaking’ on behalf of ‘dumb experience’ in order to bring it to ‘the pure expression of its own meaning’\(^ {59}\). Rather, the linguistic framework that is necessarily brought to the process of description plays not just a passive role of representing – ‘speaking’ on behalf of ‘the silence of primary consciousness’; rather, it plays an active and constructive role. This is a role where it contributes in principle to the construction of that ‘dumb experience’ in any attempt to render its content and structure in language. Any descriptive act is thus, in

\(^{58}\) See Chapter 3, pp.159-160 n.13.

this sense, an interpretive act because the description-language draws on a linguistic-cultural framework that pre-interprets the content by shaping the very way that we experience that content. And that framework biases us in the direction of the assumptions contained within the linguistic framework in which we necessarily frame our descriptions from our present cultural and historical location. Thus what we take as perceptual givens – to simply be described – are inescapably always ‘perceivings-as’ that are pre-interpreted. They are pre-interpreted as the ‘perceivings-as’ that they are as a result of our being raised in, and shaped by, a specific cultural tradition.

So in the case of the lifeworld of everyday experience, the language in which we articulate this lifeworld is an historical accumulation (sedimentation) that has deep cultural assumptions built into it. Within that framework, these deep cultural assumptions function like a second nature that it is easy to take for granted. Thus the perceptual experience we seek to describe, and the language that we draw on to describe it, are implicated in the deep hermeneutical context of a cultural tradition of interpretation that the methodological techniques of the *epoché* and the reduction are powerless to remove. The claim here is not that Merleau-Ponty ever asserted, as Husserl did, that the *epoché* and reduction deliver us a presuppositionless perspective, but rather that Merleau-Ponty doesn’t appreciate the full implications of Husserl’s failure in this direction. For, as Husserl’s attempt at a reduction to the sphere of pure subjectivity threw us back onto our intrinsic and irreducible world-directedness (the world that is ‘always already there’), so Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to recover the basic pre-predicative experience that underpins our world-directedness throws us back onto the language on which such a recovery necessarily depends.
5. The Problem of the Cognitive Recovery of the Pre-predicative

The issue of the deep hermeneutical context of descriptive practice ties directly into a further problem that has been pointed out by Margolis, Descombes, Lyotard, Kullman and Taylor. As Margolis argues, Merleau-Ponty gives a certain ‘privilege’ to the phenomenology of the pre-personal, pre-predicative level that the issue of the language/perception relation, followed through to its hermeneutical consequences, undermines. Merleau-Ponty claims that science is ‘a second-order reflection’ whose meaning derives from the foundational first order meaning that phenomenology seeks to capture. However, he is ultimately unable to make a convincing case for the ‘philosophical status’ he wishes to assign the pre-personal experience of embodied perception.

The particular problem facing Merleau-Ponty concerns the epistemological implications that follow from the issue of the language-perception relation. This represents a fundamental problem for his theory because of our inability to be sure that what we articulate in any given description of the pre-personal, pre-predicative level of experience has captured the pre-predicative meaning that Merleau-Ponty takes that experience to possess. For, in principle, we are without a method to adjudicate our success, epistemologically speaking. To make this point is in no way to deny the many important insights that the attempt has brought to light, but it is to deny, as Margolis puts it, that ‘the pre-reflective can be cognitively recovered’; thus, it directly challenges Merleau-Ponty’s view that his ‘reawakening of the pre-

---

61 Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.175.
reflective’ has the epistemological implications that he asserts. This criticism subverts his thesis of the primacy of perception in the sense that it opens up the charge that his methodological discussion, and the claims that he goes on to assert on that basis, contain implicit and unargued assumptions about the phenomenologist’s capacity to ‘re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world’ and to ‘endow that contact with a philosophical status’. We certainly can and should follow Merleau-Ponty and ‘re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world’; likewise, we can and should endow the pre-reflective with a philosophical status, but it cannot be the one that Merleau-Ponty attributes to it in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The very idea of phenomenology as not just description of the lifeworld, but as a description of the subtending level of the pre-personal and ‘ante-predicative’ is problematised as a result of raising the question of the language/perception relation. This is because if the claim is that our task is to reproduce in phenomenological discourse the ‘lived meaning’ of the phenomena of the pre-personal ‘perceived world’ that necessarily precedes that discourse, then clearly the *epoché* and reduction alone are not sufficient to ensure that this is achievable – despite their being the correct method to focus our attention on the phenomena *as phenomena*. That Merleau-Ponty in his methodological presentation holds that this is phenomenology’s task can be seen, for example, in his endorsement of Husserl’s phrase that ‘it is that as yet dumb experience … which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning’⁶². The idea is that there is a significant aspect of our experience

---

that is ‘as yet’ unexpressed philosophically – not just the ‘pre-objective’ world of experience but the foundational pre-personal and pre-predicative world of perceptual experience. And the philosopher’s primary task ought to be ‘to go back to that origin … beneath the chatter of words’ – that ‘primordial silence’\textsuperscript{63} – and achieve the discursive expression of that ‘dumb’ experience. This view embodies the way in which ‘expression’ through discursive meaning, for Merleau-Ponty, is derivative upon the meaning of the ‘lived through’ experience which is ‘as yet’ – prior to concerted phenomenological description – ‘dumb’, or unarticulated as to its content and structure.

But Merleau-Ponty’s methodological statements, and the subsequent claims made in connection with them, express an unjustifiable confidence in the prospects of a phenomenological approach being able to cognitively recover the pre-reflective perceived world. This illicit confidence can be seen, for example, in his assertion that the phenomenologists have a concept of essence that is so concretely grounded that it is ‘destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed’\textsuperscript{64}. Given this, it might be argued that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the ‘ante-predicative’ perceived world is driven by an unjustifiably optimistic conception of the capacities of language.

As we recall from previous chapters, a key part of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of objective thought concerns precisely the limitations of language in relation to the perceived world. He argues that ‘the antinomy of objective thought’

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid. p.214.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. p.xvii (italics added).
(Empiricism/Intellectualism, realism/idealism) rests on the mischaracterising of experience in the philosophies of Intellectualism and Empiricism. There he attributes the problem to the syllogistic structure underpinning the categories of objective thought, and argues that what will rectify the problem is an account of pre-objective, pre-reflective experience. But, despite the general success he is entitled to claim for the phenomenology of the lifeworld project in overturning this objectivist misrepresentation of perceptual experience (a project that is correctly characterised as an account of ‘pre-objective’ and ‘pre-reflective’ everyday experience), in principle linguistic limitations, and not simply the mismatch of objective thought and lived experience, surface in the project of description of the pre-personal level.

Merleau-Ponty’s move of putting the phenomenology of the pre-personal pre-predicative perceptual level centre stage is well motivated. It follows through on the phenomenological discourse of the ‘originary’ (‘a phenomenology of origins’65) and of ‘Fundierung’ (the founding-founded relation), plausibly supposing that the kind of relation that holds between the personal level lifeworld and the objective ‘universe’ of science – Fundierung – to hold between the personal level lifeworld and the pre-personal level of active bodily perception. For, if we engage in the phenomenology of the lifeworld we most certainly do find that there is a pre-personal bodily/perceptual level subtending the level of the personal world of everyday thought and action, as Merleau-Ponty amply demonstrates.

65 Ibid. p.xx.
Margolis specifies precisely the nature of the problem in his characterisation of the question as revolving around the problem of ‘cognitive recovery’\textsuperscript{66}. This is an epistemic issue in the sense that, although we can engage in a phenomenology of the pre-predicative level in a way that the results of our inquiry can contribute to our epistemological and ontological claims, the understanding that we achieve of the pre-personal level is not capable of having the cognitive status that it would have to have in order for Merleau-Ponty to substantiate his use of it. For Merleau-Ponty seeks to give it the status of the epistemological foundation of the level of both the objective world of scientific discourse and the lifeworld of personal thought and action.

When viewed from the methodological perspective the problem is that the phenomenological method, though opening up the phenomenal lifeworld generally, as well as the ‘perceived world’ specifically, cannot in principle give any assurances about the outcome. Nor can it even provide us with resources that might indicate the potential realisability of the concerted attempt to recover the ‘ante-predicative life of consciousness’. This is not only for the general reason that, as Merleau-Ponty says, the reflecting philosopher who ‘tries to conceive the world, others and himself and their interrelations’ is involved in ‘an act of initiative which has no guarantee in being’\textsuperscript{67}. But it is also for the specific reason that Merleau-Ponty does not successfully demonstrate in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} why we should hold that the pre-personal world is the kind of ‘thing’ that could actually be \textit{cognitively recovered} in the way that he, in his methodological discussions, indicates it can. In this sense the cognitive recoverability of this level is presupposed, and its putative

\textsuperscript{66} Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.175.
\textsuperscript{67} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.xxii.
recovery is an exploratory and experimental enterprise prompted by the philosophical benefits quite rightly perceived as potentially issuing from a close examination of the content and structure of this level of experience.

However, the actualisation of this potential benefit is precisely what the success of phenomenology must rest on. And Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, may be charged with not fully actualising the potential benefit that he programmatically spells out in the Preface and assumes throughout the text. Namely, that the key to achieving ‘a precise assessment of [the] meaning and scope’ of science (‘the second-order expression’ of ‘the world as directly experienced’), and the experiential level that has the capacity to ground a new ontology, is uncovered in the process of ‘reawakening the basic experience of the world’\(^{68}\). Merleau-Ponty is operating here with an unjustified thesis to the effect that his account of the pre-personal world has a distinct and foundational epistemic status, as it is a discourse on the originary, as opposed to the ‘second order expression’ of scientific discourse.

The view that ‘the whole universe of science’ is a ‘second-order expression’ of ‘the world as directly experienced’ and that philosophers ‘must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world’ implies that, by ‘first order expression’, Merleau-Ponty tacitly understands a discourse that expresses that basic experience – a descriptive account of our pre-predicative lived experience. Thus he talks of ‘first-hand speech – that of … the writer and philosopher who reawaken primordial experience anterior to all traditions’\(^{69}\). He talks of a ‘second-order world’

---


– the world ‘elaborated by scientific consciousness’\textsuperscript{70} – and also a ‘second-order perception’ – the ‘empirical perception’ of the natural attitude\textsuperscript{71}. This ‘second-order perception’ underpins the ‘second order expression’ that constructs the ‘second-order world’, the ‘universe’ of science.

The fact that Merleau-Ponty holds this conception ties in with the observation I made earlier about the improperly acknowledged hermeneutic dimension of his method. That is, in seeking the ‘reawakening [of] the basic experience of the world of which science is the second order expression’ he tacitly implies a view of language that the philosophical practice and the trajectory of theoretical development of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} actively undermine. Namely, that the overarching goal of reflection is to represent the pre-predicative in language. Thus, implying enough of a separation between language and perception such that language can be said to \textit{represent} pre-personal lived experience. At the same time he implies that the relationship between language and perception, although involving a separation, is such that language might be able to recover the \textit{structure} of the pre-personal fundamental level in a way that predicatively captures the essence of its pre-predicativity, its defining feature. And, by doing this, it will be able to perform the founding epistemic role that we have seen Merleau-Ponty construct for it. This view entails the claim that we are able to check our representations of pre-personal experience against that experience itself. By referring back to its ‘lived meaning’, the idea is that we will be able to adjudicate as to the clarity, accuracy and comprehensiveness of our representations. However, in light of my earlier

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid. p.19.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. p.50.
discussion, it is exceedingly difficult to see how it is the pre-predicative world that is being characterised here, rather than the pre-predicative as pre-interpreted through a contextualising linguistic-cultural lifeworld.

The developmental trajectory that Merleau-Ponty appears to be playing out in the pages of *Phenomenology Of Perception* with regards to his view of language is towards a hermeneutic phenomenology where, starting with phenomenological description, where ‘the real has to be described, not constructed or formed’\textsuperscript{72}, and by addressing the issues of the passive constitution of perception, embodiment and of the background, we realise that all description is structured by a deep cultural-linguistic context. This cultural-linguistic context performs a pre-interpreting function with respect to any description of the perceived world undertaken at any given cultural and historical location. The realisation of the role of this cultural-linguistic context is itself an achievement of the phenomenological method, and yet it is an achievement that undermines the idea of phenomenology as ‘the demand for a pure description’. For it indicates that whatever results may be achieved through this method will always rest on a descriptive procedure that consists in the description of the contingent, yet relatively stable, structures of ‘an already languaged world’\textsuperscript{73}, to use Joseph Margolis’ phrase. Thus, the following through of the descriptive procedure leads us on to the fact that the world that is ‘always already there’ is a world that is ‘always already’ languaged. And this means that we are not only drawing on a cultural-linguistic framework that is not of our creation, and which provides the description language in which we discourse on the pre-predicative, but

\textsuperscript{72} *Ibid*. p.xi.

\textsuperscript{73} Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.175.
we are also, in discoursing on the pre-personal level, necessarily discoursing in the context of an ‘always already’ languaged lifeworld. Thus perceptual experience itself, and any attempt to make it speak, is necessarily circumscribed by, and thus pre-interpreted through, a cultural-linguistic framework, a ‘fore-structure of understanding’.

6. Implications for Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology

The line of critique that I have been developing in this chapter suggests that the thesis of the primacy of perception as expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not convincing as it stands, and is in need of revision. Let us look at the implications for Merleau-Ponty’s existential ontology.

As the previous chapters combine to illustrate, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty provides a compelling exploration of the genesis of meaning via an exploration of the background of bodily perception and world. As this chapter has suggested, however, following through on certain implications of Merleau-Ponty’s existential reworking of Husserlian phenomenology for the theory of language, and for the language-perception relation, forces us to fully acknowledge the contextual depth involved in the hermeneutic circle that structures our experience as culturally and linguistically situated body-subjects. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account concretely demonstrates the inextricability of subject and world, contra to the Intellectualist bias embedded in Husserl’s phenomenological discourse that is centred on the sharp distinction between subject and object,
transcendental and empirical. Merleau-Ponty also argues for the fundamentally inter-subjective nature of human existence, again rooted in our corporeality. However, as I have just argued, Merleau-Ponty does not see the full significance of the role of language in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The central consequence of this is that the hermeneutic structure of experience obliges us not only to abandon the indefensible claims of objectivistic scientism, as well as Husserlian claims for ‘apodicticity’ via his transcendental-phenomenological science, but also Merleau-Ponty’s claims regarding the privileged epistemic role of ‘originary origins’.74

If we take the lessons of the hermeneutic turn as articulated by Heidegger and Gadamer seriously then Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the philosophical significance of the pre-predicative as ‘originary origin’ is compromised. For what attention to the constitutive role of language indicates is the need for a revised conception of the ‘originary’. Such a conception has been suggested by Joseph Margolis who argues that:

> A languaged world or a worlded language serves us as a convenient epithet to fix whatever we may suppose is the originary, incompletely penetrable precondition posited *from* the transient vantage of *whatever* bifurcated [subjective and objective] resources we assign ourselves.75

This revised conception of the ‘originary’ retains the status, as in Merleau-Ponty’s account, of the ‘incompletely penetrable precondition’. However, in encountering the

precognitive we are not thereby encountering the ‘pre-predicative’ – ‘anterior to all traditions’"76 – but rather are encountering ‘a linguaged world’.

The implication of situating Merleau-Ponty’s considerable phenomenological insight within the deep hermeneutic-linguistic context of experience is further spelled out by Margolis. Margolis argues that such a resituation means that we must treat ‘eidetic invariances (that we seem able to approach)’ and ‘cognitive privilege’ of any kind (e.g. of objectivism, apodictic phenomenology, or a phenomenology of ‘originary origins’) on the same terms. Namely, ‘as the ineluctably contingent functions of an equally contingent preformational world …’77 This ‘preformational world’ is ‘tacit, incompletely penetrable, changing, plural, capable of tolerating conceptual incommensurabilities’ and ‘itself something of an artefact constructed in the process of natural activity and eidetic reflection’78. It is also ‘profoundly horizonal as affecting the perception of invariance’ and so comprises an ‘endogenous barrier against the discovery of contextless invariance’79.

Like Merleau-Ponty’s conception, this view is ‘incompatible in an elementary way with the notion of a progressive phenomenology ranging over all possible reflection’80. And so it is ‘in principle incapable of supporting Husserl’s optimism about approximative progress in understanding a uniquely constituted world or constituting “I” such that the plural makes no sense applied to either’81. As Margolis argues, the ‘recovery of a plural with regard to whatever may be critically posited as

77 Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.158.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid. p.159.
81 Ibid.
the pregiven conditions of natural discourse is the consequence of grasping the full significance of the linguistic dimension of our situatedness in a world – the fundamentally hermeneutic structure of our situatedness. By the ‘plural’ he is referring to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a concretised plurality of subjects. Such a concretised plurality of subjects and their individual and collective histories decisively undermine the notion of a singular lifeworld that he tacitly assumes in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

The realisation that we necessarily encounter a ‘languaged world’ means that this natural language that we inherit and ‘live’, as Merleau-Ponty would say, comprises a basic, relatively determinate content whose structuring power shapes the context of our experience and thus, in this sense, is something that is phenomenologically basic. And precisely because it is basic, the phenomenological spirit of investigation must lead us to acknowledge the full implications of the hermeneutic structure of experience that sustained phenomenological analysis itself has enabled us to see.

If we incorporate these linguistic and hermeneutic corrections to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology it will be hard to deny that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction, while removing the objectivism that grows out of the natural attitude, does not and cannot remove the fact of our necessary situatedness in a received natural language tradition. And, further, that it is the primary status of this ordinary language form of discourse, making our basic experience that of a

---

‘languaged world’ via a ‘worlded language’, that Merleau-Ponty overlooks in his view of a discourse of the pre-predicative as first order.

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Merleau-Ponty abandons Husserl’s privileged claims about phenomenology as a systematic and progressive apodictic science. However in his theory of perception, as we discussed earlier, he follows through on the phenomenological discourse of the ‘originary’ (‘a phenomenology of origins’83). And thus, as Margolis points out, his theory accords an unjustifiable ‘cognitive privilege’ to the pre-predicative perceptual level that embodies a privilege of ‘originary origins’. However, in revising the language-perception relation in line with the hermeneutic structure of experience, argues Margolis, we now see that Merleau-Ponty’s ‘pre-reflective world of perception’ can be ‘introduced only … to orient our critical examination of an already thoroughly languaged world’84. So that:

… wherever the … ‘real’, ‘perceived’, precognitive, unthematized … world is “described, and not constructed or constituted” … the critical … recovery of that primary world is never more than…a second-order posit (in spite of Merleau-Ponty’s own usage) …85

Margolis observes that first-order discourse centres on the historically received assertoric discourse of natural languages, and second-order discourse (‘scientific or critical or transcendental or legitimative discourse’) critically reflects upon this

84 Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.175.
primary discourse. This view of language illustrates how, if the phenomenological
description of the pre-reflective is to link up with the distributed reference of
ordinary enunciative discourse, and thus perform the critical function with respect to
that discourse that it is supposed to perform, then it can only be a ‘second-order
posit’. As a ‘second-order posit’ it certainly has the capacity to ‘affect and alter’ our
philosophical claims. However, despite the fact that pre-predicative experience is
first-order experience, the discourse of the pre-predicative cannot achieve first-order
status because it cannot go underneath first-order ordinary enunciative discourse and
perform the fundamental grounding function that Merleau-Ponty takes his ‘authentic
speech, which formulates for the first time’\textsuperscript{86}, his discourse on the ‘originary’, to be
doing. Put succinctly, his discourse on first-order experience cannot be first-order
discourse.

Part of the way that the discourse of the pre-predicative functions for
Merleau-Ponty can be seen if we reflect on the way in which it is bound up with talk
of a singular lifeworld, thus demonstrating its derivation from the Husserlian
presupposition of constituting subject and constituted lifeworld, even as Merleau-
Ponty rejects Husserl’s characterisation of both. It follows from the argument
regarding the deep hermeneutic-linguistic context of lived experience, Margolis
observes, that ‘the Husserlian lifeworld – to which no number, no singular or plural
attaches – must be replaced by plural, variable, historicized, open, potentially
incommensurable lifeworlds’\textsuperscript{87}. Merleau-Ponty’s statements about science being a
‘second-order expression’ of the lifeworld’ indicate his view that, in giving an

\textsuperscript{86} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, p.207.
\textsuperscript{87} Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’, p.175.
account of the lifeworld, we are articulating the lifeworld shared by all humans in virtue of the fact that they share the same bodily and perceptual structures. But the thrust of his phenomenology actually serves to undermine this view because by sticking close to the details of the situatedness of the concrete body-subject, he serves to emphasise the cultural and historical situatedness of body-subjects. And a concrete exploration of this reveals them as situated in relatively stable though contingent cultural lifeworlds that, being hermeneutically structured through linguistic/cultural traditions, are not subsumable into a single lifeworld (or pre-predicative perceived world ‘anterior to all traditions’). And so, as Margolis points out, this ‘subverts altogether the intended force of Merleau-Ponty’s remark that science is the ‘second-order’ expression of the lifeworld’88.

Taken together, the critical points I have raised regarding:

1. the perception/language relation and the hermeneutic structure of experience;

2. the problem of trying to cognitively recover the pre-predicative;

and

3. the status of the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order;

add up to a compelling argument that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception is not maintainable in its original form, and that therefore we should adopt a revised version of his position. As we have seen, the key problem area centres around the epistemological and semantic dimensions of the thesis. But, as we have

88 Ibid.
also seen, Merleau-Ponty’s position is largely recoverable here via a full
acknowledgement of his method as hermeneutic phenomenology and by a revision of
his claims about the discourse of the pre-predicative as first order.

The incorporation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insights about bodily perception and the body-world relation with the corrections in the areas of language and interpretation that I have been suggesting in this chapter, results in a position that coherently and consistently manages to overcome the dualism built into the Cartesian assumptions that underpin the modern tradition from Descartes to Husserl. They suggest a compelling way to overcome the dualism with respect to the distinctions of mind-body and subject-world by appreciating the irreducibility of the intentional body-subject/world relation, as well as the irreducible relation between a ‘languaged world’ and a ‘worlded language’.

It might be argued that the critique of Merleau-Ponty’s view on language and of the language/perception has more serious implications, and that what is exposed is a fundamental incoherence at the heart of his theory. Vincent Descombes, for example, has argued that, if ‘to speak is … to give a voice to that which does not know how to speak’, then Merleau-Ponty’s is ‘a hopeless enterprise in some respects’. This is because ‘discourse may well adhere to experience, but it will always be discourse upon experience, or, speech following on, with what Derrida calls an ‘originary delay’’89. Thus he concludes that Husserl’s characterisation of

phenomenology as embarking on an ‘infinite task’ is ‘a discrete way of saying that it is unrealisable, for a promised land which we will reach at the cost of an ‘infinite journey’ is indistinguishable from a land which is eternally prohibited’\textsuperscript{90}.

Descombes goes on to enlist Jean Francois Lyotard to further this criticism. Lyotard makes the following argument against the coherence of a descriptive phenomenology of the pre-personal pre-predicative level of experience:

In so far as this life-originating world is antepredicative, all predication, all discourse, undoubtedly implies it, yet is wide of it, and properly speaking nothing may be said of it … [phenomenological description] … is a struggle of language against itself to attain the originary … In this struggle, the defeat of the philosopher, of the logos, is assured, since the originary, once described, is thereby no longer originary\textsuperscript{91}.

Summing up, Descombes argues that in seeking to ‘found the “I think” on the “I perceive”, and understand the cogito in accordance with the most classical tradition, in the sense of an “I judge”, or a predicative enunciation’, phenomenology aims to ‘found predicative activity on an “ante-predicative’ activity”’. However, given that ‘the means to this end is to relate in discourse that which precedes the discourse, the ante-predicative can never be reconstructed as it was, in its dumb purity, before being made explicit’\textsuperscript{92}.

\textsuperscript{90} Descombes, Modern French Philosophy, p.60.
\textsuperscript{91} Lyotard quoted in Ibid. p.61.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
In response to this I would argue that, firstly, there is a confusion in Descombes’ critique that we can sort out by distinguishing between the pre-personal and lifeworld levels of the ‘pre-objective’ or ‘pre-reflective’. The claim that ‘discourse may well adhere to experience’ but will always irremediably be ‘discourse upon experience, or, speech following on, with … an “originary delay”’ does not need to lead to the conclusion that the phenomenology of the lifeworld is ‘unrealisable’ in Merleau-Ponty’s, as opposed to Husserl’s, version. Descombes’ characterisation of phenomenology as a philosophy of ‘infinite tasks’ seeking a ‘promised land which we will reach at the cost of an “infinite journey”’ and from which, therefore, we are ‘eternally prohibited’ misunderstands the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s inquiry might be read, à la Margolis, as yielding stable and relatively invariant, though ultimately contingent, results. On this reading, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘essence’ must be taken to mean long-range ‘invariants’ of a nonetheless ultimately contingent character due to the nature of the deep hermeneutic structure of experience.

The presupposition in Descombes’ metaphor of an in principle completability as ‘realising’ the project is a criticism of the goals of Husserl’s phenomenological science not of Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology or the hermeneutic-phenomenological variant I have sketched above. It also confuses the problem of the possibility of a ‘cognitive recovery’ of the pre-predicative with the issue of the possibility of the cognitive recovery of the pre-objective lifeworld. The serious problem Merleau-Ponty has with the former need not be a problem for the latter, provided a Merleau-Pontian approach modifies its view on the perception/language relation, the first-order status of the discourse of the pre-
predicative, and embraces the full implications of the hermeneutic dimension of the
descriptive project. With such a modification in place it will then be consistently able
to claim that the phenomenological account of the lifeworld (now necessarily
pluralised) is hermeneutic with the goal of laying bare the deep fore-structures of
interpretation. If this move is performed then the unrealisablility claim can be
deprived of its force. The meaning of phenomenology as ‘infinite task’ simply means
that there is no in principle completion or finality to any account of the lifeworld(s);
there is always scope for further exploration and potential revision. Thus there is a
constant and ongoing role for an, in principle, uncompletable phenomenological
description. There is no ‘eternal prohibition’ here for Merleau-Ponty, as opposed to
Husserl, for there is no ‘eternal’.

However, the sense in which the unrealisablilty claim will stick is precisely
with the attempt to go beneath the level of the personal lifeworld and give a central
‘philosophical status’ to the pre-personal pre-predicative world of perceptual
experience. Lyotard makes the right distinction when he says, ‘in so far as this life-
originating world is antepredicative’ then ‘all predication, all discourse, undoubtedly
implies it, yet is wide of it’93. And so he adds, ‘… properly speaking nothing may be
said of it’94. However, the claim that ‘properly speaking nothing may be said of [the
antepredicative]’ is too strong. Something certainly may be phenomenologically said
of it and, further, what is said of it can be of philosophical consequence. Merleau-
Ponty’s discussions in Phenomenology of Perception are clear evidence of this.
However, it is the general philosophical consequences that Merleau-Ponty wishes to

93 Lyotard quoted in Descombes, Modern French Philosophy, p.61 (italics added).
94 Ibid.
draw that are subverted by the ‘struggle of language against itself to attain the originary’ that is integral to his phenomenology of the pre-personal level.

Part of what this means is that the phenomenology of the lifeworld can legitimately lay claim to the epistemic function that Merleau-Ponty attempts to attribute to the pre-personal level, in his attempt to situate it as not just the basic level of experience but as a level which can fulfil the role of epistemic foundation. This is because, unlike the discourse of the pre-predicative, the discourse of the lifeworld can legitimately claim to function as the clarification and articulation of the structure and limits of our ‘always already’ languaged lifeworld. Thus this avoids the problem of the cognitive recovery of the pre-predicative by accepting the deep hermeneutic context that necessarily forms the context of any descriptive procedure. By rejecting the epistemological claim of the pre-personal level as originary ground of the lifeworld, on grounds of the cognitive unrecoverability of the pre-personal, this move avoids the problem that attends Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the claim for a distinct and foundational epistemic status for this level can be made defensible.

As we have seen, the attempt to address the question of the meaning of being is the original goal that drives Heidegger’s formulation of his existential ontology in Being and Time. He does this through his ‘existential analytic’ of Dasein, and it is this ontological approach that Merleau-Ponty appropriates in Phenomenology of Perception, theorising the existential structures that underpin propositional theoretical thinking: human being as ‘being-in-the-world’ and as an ‘Ek-stase’. It is precisely this existential-phenomenological approach that uncovers the hermeneutic circle that structures our understanding. The ontological implication here is that what
is now exposed is the way in which different metaphysical systems, despite being relatively invariant over long periods, are nevertheless ultimately contingent. And so, arguably, it is the intrinsic contingency of metaphysics that *Being and Time* and *Phenomenology of Perception* combine to illustrate. They do this in several ways.

Firstly, they do this through their ‘displacing’ of ‘the cognitive’ with ‘the precognitively and existentially active’\(^95\). By grounding claims regarding knowledge and being in the ‘precognitively and existentially active’ they reconfigure them in terms of what it is that structures this dimension of worldly lived experience. And secondly, they do so ‘by construing the articulation of the categories as conditioned in a radically contingent way by the preformative power of ulterior categories historically already in place in a world into which we are “thrown”’\(^96\). This is the hermeneutic dimension which Heidegger lays out in *Being and Time* and which Merleau-Ponty only partially acknowledges in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This dimension of existential ontology is ‘critical’ in the sense that it articulates the conditions of possibility for a given metaphysic through a genealogy of the categories operative in a preformative fore-structuring way.

The intrinsic contingency of metaphysics is also demonstrated in the way that ‘the fixity of given categories is radically risked’ on the Heideggerean conception, in that he construes ‘the seeming system of the diachronic history of sets of categories as phenomenologically open to transformation due to different but utterly

\(^95\) Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’ p.162.
\(^96\) *Ibid*. ‘Thrown’ is Heidegger’s term intended to capture the brute facticity of our situatedness, the fact that we simply ‘find’ ourselves in a world that is ‘always already there’. 
unpredictable, utterly unsystematisable, disclosures of Sein and Dasein\textsuperscript{97}. Adapted to a Merleau-Pontian idiom, this indicates that no matter how rock solid and entrenched a given framework appears, it is always capable of modification in ways that we cannot foresee. This is because of the inexhaustible nature of the perceived world in which our framework engages in a process of ‘co-constitution’ that discloses meaning without the type of guarantees that are built into Husserl’s conception of an \textit{eidetic} phenomenological science making systematic progress toward grasping a uniquely constituted world and its constituting ego.

7. Conclusory Summary of Thesis Findings

The challenge that I set myself in this thesis was to explicate Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position on its own terms in order to explore the full significance of its challenge to scientistic naturalists— a group that, even when interested in his phenomenology of embodiment, stand in either explicit or implicit opposition to his existential ontology. The first step in the three-step argumentative trajectory of the thesis involved a critical intervention into the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ question. My critical target here comprised a set of theorists who use Merleau-Ponty to argue for an embodied approach to cognitive science, and who see recent work in the cognitive sciences as standing in a relationship of convergence and complementarity with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work. What I argued against these theorists was that their usage involves a tacit ‘scientisation’ of Merleau-

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}
Ponty’s phenomenology. That is, they tacitly morph Merleau-Ponty’s view to fit within the objectivist framework that necessarily underpins their project for an embodied cognitive science. As a result of this they miss the philosophical significance of his phenomenological claims. This significance, as we have seen, indicates that:

1. Rather than being convergent with ‘scientistic’ forms of naturalism, his position is in fact explicitly and deeply critical of the philosophical presuppositions of the general program of the cognitive sciences and scientistic philosophy of mind.

2. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy shows us that there is another way to realise a naturalistic turn than the scientistic approach that underpins the recent interdisciplinary program of the cognitive sciences, as well as cognitive science inspired philosophy of mind (the attempt to bridge the ‘explanatory gap’ that exists between phenomenological accounts and scientific models of consciousness).

3. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position refuses the possibility of ‘naturalisation’, as conceived in the ‘naturalisation of phenomenology’ debate, because ‘naturalisation’ here involves the explicit or implicit advocacy of a scientific realist ontology – which he holds as being premised on a philosophical mistake.

4. It is Merleau-Ponty’s objective in *Phenomenology of Perception* to convince his reader of the conceptual confusion at the core of the scientistic
project. And to argue in favour of a methodology that is both phenomenological and transcendental, and for an ontology that is ‘existential’, as the appropriate way to clear up this confusion.

The philosophical confusions contained in the recent ‘scientising’ of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provide a powerful motivation to put Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology back into the context of his philosophy proper. As we have seen, a close reading of Merleau-Ponty showed that he uses a methodological phenomenology in the context of an existential ontology. This existential phenomenology draws its inspiration from Heidegger’s conception of ‘fundamental ontology’ and the ‘existential analytic of Dasein in Being and Time.

Articulating Merleau-Ponty’s position drew me into an engagement with my second critical target. This target comprised a set of recent readings of Merleau-Ponty that, while understanding that he is explicitly and deeply critical of the philosophical presuppositions of the cognitive sciences and that instead he offers a transcendental philosophical account, nevertheless misunderstand key aspects of this account.

On the issue of the phenomenological reduction I argued, contra the views of Stephen Priest and Taylor Carman, that a close reading of Merleau-Ponty indicates that he does not hold that the epoché is inconsistent with being-in-the-world but rather reconceives it and advances his own modified version. This version holds that the reduction reveals the subject’s essential inherence in a concrete situation via his necessary embodiment.
The fact that we cannot achieve Husserl’s complete reduction to the ‘sphere of the transcendental ego’ and its ‘meant contents’, but rather find ourselves confronting the ‘unmotivated upsurge of the world’, means that in our phenomenological description we simply fail to locate Husserl’s transcendental ego – a pure ego that transcends the world – and the putatively self-sufficient sphere of meaning that Husserl understands this ego to inhabit. Instead, what we locate is Merleau-Ponty’s lived ‘body-subject’. To have a body is to automatically have an anchor point, a location in space and time, and so he argues that our ‘lived body’ is a pre-personal, ‘natural self’ that is necessarily and intimately tied to a world. Thus the meaningful contents and structures of experience that the phenomenologist seeks to capture are only articulable in reference to the environment in which the body-subject is necessarily immersed. Merleau-Ponty appropriates the Heideggerean ontological term ‘being-in-the-world’ to capture the fundamental phenomenological and ontological structure of world-relatedness. His conception asserts that the subject is so ‘tightly held’ in his relation to the world that there is no sharp line between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’. Rather, the subject is ‘through and through relation to the world’.

The reduction facilitates phenomenological descriptions which reveal that ‘ambiguity is of the essence of human existence’. There are two central manifestations of this ontological ambiguity. Firstly, that objects are ambiguous because their interpretation is never definitively settled for all time. They are a movement between determinacy and indeterminacy, never fully determinate but

---

98 Merleau-Ponty, ‘What is Phenomenology?’ p.61.
never simply indeterminate. And secondly, in his account of humans as ‘body-subjects’ we are fundamentally ambiguous between ‘mind’ and ‘body’. In our experience the body is never fully ‘object’ or fully ‘subject’ and, by connection, our experience is never fully ‘inner’ experience or fully ‘outer’ experience. We live an ambiguity that defies the traditional dualistic categories: a pure ego outside space (Intellectualism) or a pure object like any other object (Empiricism).

Contra Joel Smith and Stephen Priest, I argued that Merleau-Ponty holds that, although the ‘putting in abeyance’ of ‘the assertions arising out of the natural attitude’ is a necessary condition for overturning the natural attitude, it is not a sufficient one. This is because this approach alone does not identify the unique status of our natural attitude as a ‘kind of “faith”’ – a kind of primitive perceptual understanding that is so fundamental that it is the condition of the possibility for us either holding, denying or bracketing any of our propositional beliefs, including the ‘general thesis of the natural attitude’. Further, due to its perceptual rootedness, it is not overturnable via purely propositional means as it is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a perceptual ‘faith’ – our fundamental pre-predicative ‘faith’ in the world that is there for us. It therefore cannot simply be an issue of asserting, denying or bracketing a proposition because the possibility of such propositional contents rest on a background context of the ‘always already there’ ‘world’, which rests on, and takes shape for us through, the process of embodied lived perception. Only by identifying perception’s role in encouraging the ‘mistake of objective thought’ via its natural movement from indeterminacy to determinacy can we truly perform an epoché and phenomenological reduction: an overturning of the natural attitude at its source in the
structure of perception itself, bracketing objectivism in the interest of non-dogmatic philosophical theorising.

On the issue of his transcendentalism, we saw that Sebastian Gardner and Thomas Baldwin misconstrue Merleau-Ponty’s use of a transcendental method as necessitating ‘a new kind of transcendental idealism’. Counter to this, I argued that existential phenomenology is in fact a transcendental anti-realism that rejects the Kantian epistemological problematic that gives rise to the traditional the realism-idealism debate. Gardner and Baldwin misread Merleau-Ponty because they bring him too close to Kant, overlooking the significance of the existential dimension of his thought.

My account of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental philosopher, by contrast, illustrated the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s is an original existentialist position that uses a transcendental methodology. My discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Kant and Husserl, and his scaled down use of transcendental theorising, served to mark out his distance from their transcendental idealism. In using the ‘principle of evidence’ against Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues that his phenomenology of perception shows something that Husserl, due to his ‘Intellectualist’ bias, could not see. This is the primacy of pre-objective embodied perception, the complex, ambiguous nature of this perceptual experience, and the basic role of ‘motor-intentional’ bodily perception in the co-constitution of the meaningful world that we experience. This phenomenologically based realisation helps us to grasp the inseparable and intricate connection between subjectivity and embodied action. And, as a direct result of this, it serves to severely constrain the kind of account of
transcendental subjectivity that can be formulated in this new context. This is because Merleau-Ponty has blocked Husserl’s ‘Intellectualist’ move, which emphasises ‘the properly philosophical task of universal constitution’ for which the return to the lifeworld is understood to be a ‘preparatory step’.

Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘transcendental subject’ is that of a ‘body-subject’ of always world-directed and historically and socially situated lived experience. As a result, the kinds of claims that he thinks the transcendental philosopher can make are very limited when viewed in contrast to Husserl’s expansive conception of philosophy as a universal and rigorous transcendental science. In contrast to Husserl, his scaled-down and reformed conception of transcendental subjectivity sticks closer to the phenomena of bodily experience. We saw this, for example, in his ‘retreat’ to making claims regarding the transcendental conditions that underpin the lived experience of the body-subject in terms of his a priori ‘body schema’.

On the issue of his conception of an ‘existential dialectics’ I argued that the sense in which his philosophy is dialectical is either misconstrued or incompletely construed: misconstrued, as a result of reading him too closely to Hegel; incompletely construed, as a result of focusing on one aspect of his use of dialectics without properly relating it to others. Either way, the authors I considered fail to capture the full originality of Merleau-Ponty’s view. Both of these problems result from their failing to fully appreciate the way in which the universal phenomenological constraint on Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical thinking makes it an

‘existential dialectic’ – a dialectic within the bounds of ‘the principle of phenomenology’.

As we saw, the term ‘dialectic’ is substantially reconfigured in the process of its importation into Merleau-Ponty’s ‘existential dialectics’. His conception is all too easily misunderstood if the language of dialectics that he uses is interpreted through the lens of its traditional meaning in Hegelian phenomenology, and not properly situated in the framework of existential ontology. This confusion is dispelled by realising that Merleau-Ponty has three dominant senses of dialectic. The first sense refers to the methodological structure of his critique of Intellectualism and Empiricism in *Phenomenology of Perception*, a dialectic of ‘objective thought’. The second, ontological, usage of the term dialectics refers to the model of reason and meaning appropriate to the ontological level, providing the ‘logical structure’ of his ‘existential-dialectical’ categories (‘body-subject’ and ‘being-in-the-world’). The third usage expresses the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the individual and their cultural and historical context.

Moving on from the question of the correct interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position and method, I addressed the third step in my three-step argument: problems attending Merleau-Ponty’s central thesis of the primacy of perception. As I argued earlier in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s thesis faces a significant problem due to his conception of the language/perception relation. Merleau-Ponty does not see the full significance of the way that our world ‘is encountered and inhabited in and through language’\(^ {101} \), and fails to acknowledge the

\(^{101}\) Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, p.248.
deep linguistic context that is the enabling and conditioning background through which phenomenological description necessarily takes place. Despite the fact that we can engage in a phenomenology of the pre-predicative level in a way that the results of our inquiry can contribute to our epistemological and ontological claims, the understanding that we achieve of the pre-personal level is not capable of serving as the epistemological foundation of the level of both the objective world of scientific discourse and the lifeworld of personal thought and action. As such, Merleau-Ponty operates with an unjustified thesis to the effect that his account of the pre-personal world has a distinct and foundational epistemic status, because it is a discourse on the ‘originary’ as opposed to the ‘second order expression’ of scientific discourse. It is exceedingly difficult, I concluded, to see how it is the pre-predicative world that is being characterised, rather than the pre-predicative as pre-interpreted through a contextualising linguistic-cultural lifeworld.

The central consequence of this is, as Margolis has argued, that Merleau-Ponty’s claim regarding the philosophical significance of the pre-predicative as ‘originary origin’\textsuperscript{102} is compromised. Attention to the constitutive role of language indicates the need for a revised conception of the ‘originary’. This revised conception retains the status of an ‘incompletely penetrable precondition’\textsuperscript{103}. However, in encountering the pre-objective we are not thereby encountering the pre-predicative

\textsuperscript{102} Margolis, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics’ p.155.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
'anterior to all traditions'104 – but rather encountering ‘a languaged world’ via a ‘worlded language’105.

Furthermore, despite removing the objectivism that grows out of the natural attitude, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological reduction does not and cannot remove the fact of our necessary situatedness in a received natural language tradition. And it is the primary status of this ordinary language form of discourse that Merleau-Ponty overlooks in his view of the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order. As such, I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s concretised plurality of body-subjects, coupled with the argument regarding the deep hermeneutic-linguistic context of lived experience, undermines the notion of a singular lifeworld that he tacitly assumes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As Margolis observes, this view ought to be ‘replaced by plural, variable, historicized, open, potentially incommensurable lifeworlds’106.

This critique suggests grounds for adopting a revised version of Merleau-Ponty’s position. This revised position involves a full acknowledgement of his method as a hermeneutic phenomenology and a revision of his claims about the discourse of the pre-predicative as first-order. Although this revised account retains his insights about the lived body, perception and the necessary situatedness of the subject, the problems that I raised with the thesis of the primacy of perception seem to necessitate the rejection of the idea of an account of the pre-predicative as capable of serving as epistemological ground. As I argued, it is hard to see how Merleau-

Ponty can avoid this revision to the epistemological dimension of the primacy of perception thesis.

Finally, in relation to contemporary debates in the area of epistemology and ontology, my exegetical and critical work, by contributing to a fuller understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, therefore contributes to a clearer understanding of the nature of his deep challenge to scientistic naturalism. In explicating the uniqueness of Merleau-Ponty’s position (a liberal naturalism that nevertheless utilises a transcendental method) in relation to other key figures in the tradition, the challenge that he represents to scientistic naturalism is likewise shown to be unique. Merleau-Ponty’s liberal naturalist position represents a powerful critique of the scientistic naturalism that underpins the cognitive sciences program. It follows from this that, at the least, any would-be naturaliser of phenomenology ought to consider deeply Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of the cognitive scientific thinkers of his day and the general critique of objectivism on which it relies. More radically, his phenomenology of the lived body and critique of objective thought suggests that the project of the cognitive sciences rests on a foundational philosophical mistake. This claim represents a profound challenge to the philosophical underpinnings of scientistic naturalism that contemporary philosophers ought to take very seriously. They should do this because Merleau-Ponty’s liberal naturalist alternative, through its powerful critique of the Intellectualism of Kant and Husserl, coupled with its equally powerful critique of scientism, presents a philosophy capable of doing justice to the claims of the sciences by resituating them within an existential-hermeneutic framework that fully acknowledges and values their explanatory and predictive power, but which also articulates their limits with respect to ontology. And it does
this while ‘maintaining the sharpest sense of subjectivity’\textsuperscript{107} – something that scientism has always failed to do.

\textsuperscript{107} Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism’, p.63.
Bibliography


