

## Merleau-Ponty's Transcendental Theory of Perception

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I am concerned here with the status of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. Since my primary aim is to determine the *kind* of account offered by Merleau-Ponty, I will not offer detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty's highly original treatments of particular topics in the theory of perception, such as sensation, spatial awareness, or the role of the body. Instead I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of perception should not, in fact, be understood at all as a theory of perception in the usual sense of a theory formulated with a view to the solution of problems of psychological explanation and constrained accordingly; rather it should be understood as belonging to transcendental philosophy, conceived as a form of idealist metaphysics. If this is correct, evaluation of Merleau-Ponty's claims about perception needs to be cast in terms remote from those that a philosopher of mind applies to a theory of perception. Though I will not attempt here a full and final evaluation, I will set out what I take to be the basic justification offered by Merleau-Ponty for his transcendental claims.

There is a general issue regarding the relation of writings in the phenomenological tradition to analytic philosophy of mind. On the one hand it would seem that, whatever else it may comprehend, phenomenology is concerned in the first instance with the same topic as philosophy of mind: the phenomenologist is interested in mental states or phenomena and engaged, like the philosopher of mind, in making claims about their essential nature, necessary and sufficient or constitutive conditions, and so on. Accordingly it seems

reasonable to expect that, allowing for differences of vocabulary and methodology, it will be possible to find points of convergence on matters of substance between phenomenology and philosophy of mind, and the recent literature on Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty has suggested an abundance of these.

However, if what I argue below is correct, then this view, for all its apparent plausibility, is mistaken with regard to Merleau-Ponty. Though nothing follows directly from this regarding phenomenology in general, it does suggest a more general conclusion, namely that something essential to the phenomenological project necessarily goes out of focus in the attempt to read the phenomenologists as if their writings address the same questions as the philosophy of mind.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first two sections I will describe two competing interpretations of Merleau-Ponty. Section 1 outlines the view of those who affirm Merleau-Ponty's convergence with the philosophy of mind, which I will refer to as the Psychological Interpretation, and identifies considerations supporting it and some of its implications. Section 2 states briefly the Transcendental Interpretation, which views Merleau-Ponty in the light of the history of transcendental philosophy and claims to discover at the heart of his philosophical project an original form of idealism. The next two sections develop this interpretation. Section 3 considers how, on the Transcendental Interpretation, Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and transcendental commitments are related logically. This, it will be seen, requires consideration of Merleau-Ponty's transcendental turn. Section 4 discusses Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion of ambiguity, since this, I argue, allows us to identify a clear line of descent from Kant and to grasp Merleau-Ponty's fundamental metaphysical thesis. Section 5 considers Merleau-Ponty's view of the relation of phenomenology and psychology, and his relation to the philosophy of mind.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Psychological Interpretation

1. On what I will call the Psychological Interpretation, the *Phenomenology of Perception* attempts to establish certain claims regarding the nature of perceptual experience independently of any transcendental or metaphysical presuppositions.

The proponent of the Psychological Interpretation discovers in the *Phenomenology* a series of arguments for conclusions familiar from analytic philosophy of mind: against the concept of sensation, or a certain classical empiricist version thereof, and against the identification of perception with judgement or characterization of perceptual content as conceptual; and in favour of a rich and holistic theory of perceptual content which forges a deep constitutive link of perception with bodily capacities. Merleau-Ponty is interpreted as arguing on the basis of a familiar mixture of considerations of explanatory scope and completeness, theoretical perspicuity, fulfilment of epistemological desiderata, and phenomenological accuracy, his strategy being to measure philosophical theories of perception against our pre-philosophical concept of perception, and to ask if the theories are faithful to the character that perceptual experience, in its full range, has for us.

The Psychological Interpretation is not obliged to deny that the *Phenomenology* contains metaphysical claims, but it will recommend that we attempt to understand these in the first instance as extrapolations from its prior, non-metaphysical claims about perception,<sup>2</sup> and if they cannot be so understood, then it will hold them to one side. The essential point for the Psychological Interpretation is simply the independence of the theory of perception, with respect to both the sense of its claims and the arguments given for them, from whatever metaphysics Merleau-Ponty may wish also to advance.

2. A number of considerations may be taken to support this view. It is in the first place suggested by the text of the *Phenomenology* itself regarding the content and order of its four divisions, the first of which (the Introduction) examines theories of perception with close reference to a large quantity of empirical material, and the second of which (Part One) pursues the connection of perception with the body. Not until the concluding chapters (the final chapter in Part Two, and Part Three) does Merleau-Ponty turn to metaphysical issues—those specific to human beings, including intersubjectivity, freedom and self-consciousness—and briefly to general epistemological issues of truth and objectivity.

The Psychological Interpretation is supported also by the continuity of the *Phenomenology* with Merleau-Ponty's earlier *The Structure of Behaviour*, which provides a close examination of neurophysiological and functional theories of the organism, and much of which reads as a study in the philosophy of psychology. The *Phenomenology* begins with an explicit commitment to the phenomenological method, but otherwise may seem a direct extension of the line of holist, anti-reductionist thought begun in *The Structure of Behaviour*. Even the commitment to the phenomenological method which distinguishes the *Phenomenology* from the earlier work need not be regarded as signalling a real change of direction, in so far as the alliance with Husserl announced in the Preface can be interpreted as a renunciation of any metaphysical premises for philosophical enquiry and it soon comes to seem in any case that Merleau-Ponty's version of the phenomenological method is loosely defined and incorporates little of Husserl's purism and conception of rigorous science.

There is, furthermore, the obvious contrast of Merleau-Ponty with the other phenomenologists: Merleau-Ponty pays close attention to psychological science, and to its detail, rather than just referring in wholly general, critical terms to the very idea of empirical psychology. Sartre's early writings on imagination are also informed by empirical psychology, but Sartre uses it to chiefly negative ends, and *Being and Nothingness* sets out with a

statement of a set of supposed apodictic *a priori* truths concerning consciousness. By contrast, the *Phenomenology* seems to start on solidly *a posteriori* terrain: Merleau-Ponty appears willing to entertain, at least provisionally, the conceptual possibility that consciousness can be grasped in empirical-scientific, naturalistic terms.

The recent secondary literature—most prominently in the work of Hubert Dreyfus, Shaun Gallagher and Sean Kelly—is rich with discussion of Merleau-Ponty exemplifying the Psychological Interpretation. It is argued that Merleau-Ponty contributes to contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind by providing arguments for the dependence of personal-level on sub-personal states, of conceptual on nonconceptual mental content, and of consciousness on embodiment; that Merleau-Ponty provides a convincing critique of the representationalism which holds sway in cognitive science and more generally furnishes insights which are obscured by cognitive science's bias in favour of cognition over performance; that Merleau-Ponty's account of skill acquisition stands in deep accord with developments in brain science neural network theory; and so forth.<sup>3</sup> The overarching value of Merleau-Ponty for the philosophy of mind consists, on this view, in the fact that Merleau-Ponty denies the autonomy of the personal level of psychological explanation without any commitment to reduction to the physical, allowing his philosophy of perception to appeal both to those who argue for the necessity and integrity of the sub-personal domain opened up by cognitive science, and to those who favour a rich naturalism, who find in Merleau-Ponty a view of the mind which is non-materialist and non-reductionist yet also firmly anti-dualist.<sup>4</sup>

3. Among the consequences of recruiting Merleau-Ponty to the task of scientific investigation of the mental, and of claiming that his phenomenological studies support and receive support from empirical work, are (first) that his philosophical claims become subject in turn to empirical correction, and (second) that the task of explanation—in a *bone fide* and full-

blooded sense, as opposed to the mere descriptive gathering and clarification of data—tends inevitably to pass out of the hands of phenomenology into neurophysiology and other more empirically tough-minded quarters. These consequences are however acknowledged and regarded as proper and acceptable by proponents of the Psychological Interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly the suggestion that phenomenology serves to clarify psychological *explananda* but lacks explanatory power of its own, is troublesome, and I will emphasize later that it runs contrary to Merleau-Ponty's intentions. For the present, another important implication of the Psychological Interpretation should be noted. The *Phenomenology* does not stop with a discussion of the nature of consciousness, experience or mental content: as noted earlier, the concluding chapters of the work set out a general metaphysics of human existence. Moreover, the *Phenomenology* advances from its account of perception to a general metaphysical position which Merleau-Ponty wants to locate between idealism and realism, but which it is scarcely misleading to describe as idealist.<sup>6</sup> In the relevant parts of the text it is quite clear that Merleau-Ponty's talk of perceptual experience as comprising 'pre-objective being', along with his critique of classical philosophical and psychological theories of perception as instances of 'objective thought', is fully metaphysical in intention. That is to say, talk of pre-objective being is not just talk of *experience* prior to the involvement of objectivity concepts in experience: it is talk of experienced *being* which is pre-objective.<sup>7</sup> Nor is the critique of 'objective thought' equivalent to a critique of theories which deny the possibility of experience independent of objectivity concepts: it is also a critique of the *metaphysical* claim that objective representation is adequate to the representation of reality, or put the other way around, that reality is as objectivity concepts represent it as being. Pre-objective being and objective thought are, in Merleau-Ponty's full picture, terms of art belonging to metaphysics, not restricted to the philosophical analysis of mental phenomena.

Accordingly, the Psychological Interpretation is required to say of the *Phenomenology* that it contains a solid first argumentative half which establishes plausible conclusions regarding the nature of perception and the body, and a second argumentative half which, whatever its worth, lacks direct logical connection with the first.

The problem is that Merleau-Ponty seems unaware of this logical division, and this obliges the Psychological Interpretation to adopt a critical stance. There is no shortage of places, between adjacent sentences or within single sentences, where Merleau-Ponty must be regarded from the standpoint of the Psychological Interpretation as making a direct and unargued transition from philosophy of psychology to metaphysics. For example: Merleau-Ponty draws the conclusion regarding the body, from its possession of intentional properties and the asymmetry between how it is present to itself and how its objects are present to it, that the body is not in fact 'in' space at all, but rather 'inhabits' space (PP 139), and that an absolute, non-epistemological distinction must be drawn between the body *qua* object of science, the objective body, and the phenomenal body, the *corps propre* or *corps vécu*. Once we begin to look for them, such points—where Merleau-Ponty apparently confuses psychology-cum-epistemology with metaphysics, or distinctions of modes of presentation with distinctions of objects—are not hard to find.

This point has been well made by Thomas Baldwin, who describes Merleau-Ponty's fundamental thesis that 'perception is "transcendental" in the sense that it cannot be adequately understood from within a fully objective, scientific conception of human life' as deriving from Merleau-Ponty's argument that 'because perceptual experience is epistemologically fundamental it cannot be the case that perception itself is fully comprehended within the explanatory perspective of natural science'.<sup>8</sup> As Baldwin points out, if that is Merleau-Ponty's argument, then the naturalist will respond immediately that it rests on a confusion of epistemological with metaphysical priority; and instantly the whole anti-naturalistic,

metaphysical aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy appears to be the result of, to borrow a phrase of P. F. Strawson's from another context, a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness.<sup>9</sup>

The proponent of the Psychological Interpretation is thus driven to say that Merleau-Ponty sought a theory of perceptual content which avoids reducing it to either sensation or judgement, and that what he is right about, or at least offers a plausible defence of, is the idea that perceptual content is in a number of respects *sui generis*; his talk of the 'pre-objectivity' of perception should be translated into talk of the irreducibly holistic, nonconceptual, motor-conditioned, etc., nature of perceptual content. Merleau-Ponty's error was to think that, just because certain sorts of bad naturalistic theories of perception fail to do justice to the phenomena, naturalism itself must be rejected—he mistook the failure of *narrowly* empiricist theories of perception for the idea that perceptual experience cannot be a content of the natural world, or again, mistook the fact that perceptual experience lacks a certain very narrow sort of objectivity, for its non-objectivity *tout court*. To which it may be added that, had Merleau-Ponty been acquainted with the more sophisticated empirical psychological science of our present day, he might well have avoided this mistake.<sup>10</sup>

4. Doubts about the unity of the *Phenomenology* are not just a function of the Psychological Interpretation. The objection that the *Phenomenology* fails to hold together its philosophy of psychology with its metaphysics was put to Merleau-Ponty by the Hegelian philosopher Jean Hyppolite:

I would say simply that I do not see the necessary connection between the two parts of your paper [in which Merleau-Ponty had provided a synopsis of the *Phenomenology*]—between the description of perception, which presupposes no ontology, and the philosophical conclusions which you draw, which do presuppose an ontology, namely,



an ontology of meaning. In the first part of your paper you show that perception has a meaning, and in the second part you arrive at the very being of this meaning, which constitutes the essence of man. And the two parts do not seem to be completely interdependent. Your description of perception does not necessarily involve the philosophical conclusions of the second part of your paper. Would you accept such a separation? (PrP 39)

Merleau-Ponty's reply to Hyppolite's question was: 'Obviously not.' His immediately following statement was however perhaps not sufficiently full or clear to entirely silence Hyppolite's doubts: 'I have not, of course, said everything which it would be necessary to say on this subject. For example, I have not spoken of time or its role as foundation and basis' (PrP 39). One can see how temporality might provide some sort of bridge—the role played by temporality in Heidegger's *Being and Time* might for example be interpolated in the *Phenomenology*—but only traces of such an idea can be found in the *Phenomenology* itself,<sup>11</sup> and it is in any case hard to see how, even if it did restore the systematic unity alleged by Hyppolite to be wanting, temporality could also provide an effective basis for confuting the charge that Merleau-Ponty's general practice of transition from the theory of perception to metaphysics incorporates a fallacy. It remains to be shown, therefore, that the work is coherently unified in the way that Merleau-Ponty claims it to be.

## **2. The Transcendental Interpretation**

1. What I will call the Transcendental Interpretation rejects the idea that the *Phenomenology* undertakes an enquiry into the nature of perceptual experience for its own sake: the purpose of

Merleau-Ponty's enquiry into perception, it maintains, lies in its contribution to a transcendental theory with metaphysical implications.<sup>12</sup>

Merleau-Ponty provides in his discussions of vision and of the body early in Part One many statements of how the conditions that his phenomenology uncovers are intended to be in the true and genuine sense transcendental, i.e. *a priori* and necessary, and non-identical with empirical, contingent or mundane states of affairs. He denies that the structure of vision, its perspectival articulation and figure/ground form, is due to 'the contingent aspects of my bodily make-up, for example the retinal structure' (PP 67–68). Similarly the permanent and ineliminable presence of the body—along with other of its features, including its affectivity—is described as a necessity that is not 'merely physical' but rather 'metaphysical' (PP 91). Kant's Copernican form of explanation is employed in the argument that Merleau-Ponty gives for this thesis, which corresponds closely to Kant's argument regarding space and time in the metaphysical expositions of the Transcendental Aesthetic: the body's permanence cannot be 'a necessity of fact, since such necessity presupposes' it, and 'factual situations can only impact upon me if my nature is already such that there are factual situations for me' (PP 91). Merleau-Ponty affirms, therefore, the distinction of transcendental from empirical necessity,<sup>13</sup> and that the subject's mode of cognition has Kantian explanatory priority over the objects of cognition.

2. The positions under attack in the *Phenomenology* are grouped under the general heading of 'objective thought', and fall into two kinds, each identified with a different form of philosophical explanation:<sup>14</sup> Empiricism seeks to explain the objectual character of experience in terms of relations between an independent natural reality and human subjects conceived as items located within its causal nexus; Intellectualism treats the objectual character of experience as the product of subjective operations guided by thought. Empiricism includes

various forms of classical empiricist philosophy, scientific realism and naturalism, while Intellectualism encompasses various forms of seventeenth-century rationalism, Kant, Husserl, and Sartre.<sup>15</sup> Both are defined with reference to a particular, highly abstract, transcendental *explanandum*, namely the *objectual character* of experience, its articulation into objects and its character *as* experience, i.e., as involving a relation of subject to object. Empiricism deserves the label 'objective thought' because it takes as given the thought of a pre-articulated realm of *objects* (in which human subjects are included); Intellectualism does so because its explanatory bottom-line is provided by *thoughts* of objects.

The overall argument of the *Phenomenology* is designed accordingly to criticize the various theories of Empiricists and Intellectualists in a unified way which leads to the identification of a common underlying error, and to set out an alternative account of the objectual character of experience. The two aims of the *Phenomenology*—the negative, critical-diagnostic work, and the provision of a positive alternative—are of course not independent: the common error is the assumption of objective thought, to which Merleau-Ponty's own theory of transcendental conditions is meant to provide the only possible alternative. Merleau-Ponty's theory, in the briefest statement, is that the fundamental ground of the objectual character of experience lies in the pre-objectivity of perception: this, he argues, makes it possible for a subject to be presented with an articulated realm of objects, and it also allows us to understand how reflection can be led astray into thinking that what makes this realm possible is instead either the objects themselves or our thoughts of them.

### **3. Theory of perception and transcendental metaphysics**

1. The key question for the Transcendental Interpretation concerns the logical relation of the *Phenomenology's* theory of perception and its transcendental metaphysics. There are three possibilities:

(A) That the transcendental metaphysics logically *follows from* the theory of perception.

(B) That the transcendental standpoint, from which the transcendental metaphysics will be developed, is assumed at the outset but only *provisionally*, as a hypothesis to be tested and confirmed by the discussion of perception.

(C) That the transcendental standpoint is assumed from the outset *non-provisionally* by the discussion of perception.

I will argue that, although there are grounds for thinking that Merleau-Ponty's argumentative intentions are not fully clear, his considered view veers towards (C), which also makes the best sense of his position.

2. Let us begin with (A). If Merleau-Ponty's intention were to present in the *Phenomenology* a sequence of argumentative steps—first a refutation of naturalism, then a critique of Kant and Husserl, followed by an account of their common objectivist error, concluding with the correct transcendental theory—then the work as a whole could be regarded as avoiding any philosophically significant presuppositions, and so as arguing from scratch and in a linear manner for Merleau-Ponty's transcendental-metaphysical position.

This reading is attractive for an obvious reason: if the *Phenomenology* proceeds via an internal critique of naturalism or at least a critique on grounds which avoid transcendentalist

presuppositions, to establish the general necessity for a transcendental approach, then the earlier chapters of the *Phenomenology* comprise an *argument for the transcendental turn*.

This is not, however, what we find. Consider the *Phenomenology's* arguments against Empiricism. Merleau-Ponty assembles numerous instances where Empiricist explanations are revealed to have gaps. This does not, however, spell an end to Empiricism, and indeed it is hard to see how it could do so, since every point of incompleteness in Empiricist explanation simply provides—in the eyes of the Empiricist—a new *empirical explanandum* which stimulates the development of an improved empirical theory. For example, if 'sensation' as classically conceived does not facilitate the discovery of psychological laws, or otherwise impedes empirically significant theory, then what follows is just that scientific psychology should substitute a different conception of the original causal input to cognition. Merleau-Ponty could discredit this movement towards increasing sophistication in Empiricism only if he could show (a) that the gaps in extant empirical explanations are *in themselves not empirical*, or (b) that empirical explanations of perception are *intrinsically faulty*. But since, as noted previously, Merleau-Ponty does not seem to want to argue in Sartre's fashion that the very idea of treating the mental in terms of efficient causality is conceptually awry, the only route that he has to (b) would seem to be via (a), and it is hard to see what could *compel* the Empiricist to accept that an empirical gap is in truth a manifestation of non-empirical being. Merleau-Ponty himself is fully aware of this difficulty:

empiricism cannot be refuted [. . .] Generally speaking, the description of phenomena does not enable one to refute thought which fails to grasp itself and takes up residence in things [i.e. objective thought]. The physicist's atoms will always appear more real [. . .] The conversion of point of view must be undertaken by each one for himself, whereupon it will be seen to be justified by the abundance of phenomena which it

elucidates. Before its discovery, these phenomena were inaccessible, and to the description of them which we offer empiricism can always retort that it *does not understand*. (PP 23)

If we examine the text of the Introduction and Part One in the light of these remarks, we find that at the crucial points where an argument for the transcendental turn might have been expected, Merleau-Ponty does indeed simply jump from the identification of a gap in empirical explanation to a transcendental assertion. Examples were given in Section 2—of the body's not being 'in' space, and of the distinction between the objective and the phenomenal body—and many others can be found. Having argued in the chapter on sensation that no such unit of experience exists, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the concept of perception 'indicates a *direction* rather than a primitive function' (PP 12). In the chapter on association, having shown that bare association is unable to yield an analysis of memory, Merleau-Ponty asserts that one must therefore admit 'an original text which carries its meaning within itself [. . .] this original text is perception itself' (PP 21). Much of what Merleau-Ponty has to say in these places against Empiricism simply invokes, with some modification of terminology or emphasis, Kantian or Husserlian lines of thought, as if he were regarding the transcendental turn as a *fait accompli*, executed already and decisively earlier in the history of philosophy. But if this is so, then Merleau-Ponty is taking transcendental anti-naturalism for granted: the argument for it must be offstage in the *Phenomenology* and the Introduction's critique of Empiricist theories of perception regarded as presupposing arguments given already by Kant or Husserl.<sup>16</sup> That Merleau-Ponty does not intend to argue to the transcendental position from scratch is, on the face of it, what he tells us when in the Preface he avows a commitment to phenomenology conceived as 'a study of essences', 'a transcendental philosophy', 'a rejection of science' (PP vii–viii).

Consider next Merleau-Ponty account of the 'reduction to the pre-objective' in *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>17</sup> Here Merleau-Ponty appears to want to introduce and justify the phenomenological method which will take us to his transcendental conclusions on the ground that it (alone) is *presuppositionless*. The notion that philosophy should proceed from such a starting point recalls a string of modern philosophers from Descartes to Husserl, but a difficulty confronts the supposition that Merleau-Ponty is following that well-trodden path. The problem is simply that what Merleau-Ponty claims we discover when we discard our presuppositions is nothing less than the 'inverse' of common sense (VI 157). Common sense, he tells us, attempts to 'construct perception out of the perceived': it theorizes 'causes' of perception which act on us (VI 156) and thereby presupposes 'correlatives or counterparts of the *objective* world' (VI 157).<sup>18</sup> It follows that Merleau-Ponty's presupposition-free realm of phenomena is *inaccessible* merely on the basis of a suspension of ordinary judgements of objects' empirical reality: access to the phenomena obscured by common sense requires a *positive*, purgative operation.<sup>19</sup> Waiving the problem that on the face of it some theoretical apparatus is surely required for this operation, it must in any case have been shown beforehand that the common sense 'given' is *contaminated* with presuppositions, i.e. that what is given to common sense not merely *has* presuppositions but that those presuppositions are cognitively *defective*. And it cannot be a strictly epistemological motive that has led us to this conclusion, since Merleau-Ponty evinces none of the relevant epistemic anxieties concerning objectivity and rationality; he shows, for instance, no interest in retracing the skeptical, certainty-orientated route of Descartes' *Meditations*.<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty instead motivates his call to avoid presuppositions with the statement that 'the enigma of the brute world is finally left intact by science and by reflection' (VI 156), which may suggest (A), but in fact does not help us to construe the adoption of the transcendental standpoint as motivated sufficiently by a prior and independent critique of Empiricism: for the *relevant sense* in which science and

reflection leave the enigma of the brute world 'intact', i.e. unexplained, and in which the bruteness of the world can be designated an 'enigma', cannot be grasped unless transcendental conceptions are already in play; as we saw Merleau-Ponty imply in the passage quoted above from PP 23, some prior, alternative philosophical conception must be presupposed if Empiricism is to be grasped as having explanatory limitations.<sup>21</sup>

3. Before jumping to affirm (C), we should briefly consider (B), which might seem to accommodate the foregoing points, without surrendering Merleau-Ponty to the argumentative circularity of (C).

It might be thought that the *Phenomenology* can avoid strict commitment at the outset to the transcendental framework—rather in the way Kant describes his Copernican notion that objects conform to our mode of knowledge as a 'hypothesis' to be tested and proven—if its argument is read as a dialectic between, on the one side, the various species of objective thought, and on the other, Merleau-Ponty's transcendental metaphysics of pre-objectivity, which is concluded ultimately in the latter's favour.

There is however a double difficulty with this suggestion. First, if Merleau-Ponty's starting point consists of two equally weighted hypotheses, a justification is wanted for the parity of the initial weightings. Why should the Empiricist, who enjoys, as Merleau-Ponty himself concedes, *prima facie* agreement with common sense, accept it? Second, even if this difficulty is removed, we are no better off in understanding how the dialectic can be conducted to the satisfaction of the Empiricist,<sup>22</sup> since as said earlier, each point claimed by Merleau-Ponty as an opening to the pre-objective will be regarded by the Empiricist as merely a cue for the revision of scientific theory; the theory of perception on its own will provide no resources for showing either inference, that of the Empiricist or that of Merleau-Ponty, to have the greater justification.



4. It thus seems fair to conclude that there is no logical gap between Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Empiricism and notion of attaining presuppositionless-ness, and his commitment to transcendental explanation. This squares with the fact that for the most part Merleau-Ponty's text does not differentiate between the tasks of criticizing Empiricism, Kant, etc., and of formulating his own transcendental theory: the relevant arguments are presented alongside one another rather than serially, so that the illegitimate hegemony of objective thought and the reality of pre-objective being are brought into view simultaneously.

If (C) is correct, and the *Phenomenology* is committed from its very first page to a transcendental framework which its discussion of perception presupposes, does the absence of an independent rebuttal of realist or naturalistic positions constitute a weakness in its argument? It does not, if the *context* of that argument is one in which it is already accepted that the proper form of philosophical explanation consists in the provision of transcendental conditions. In that case, the *Phenomenology* should be regarded as simply not addressed to the convinced naturalist or scientific realist: it is not intended to persuade anyone who is not already of a transcendental persuasion. Though this means that in one respect Merleau-Ponty is merely preaching to the converted, by no means does it render his argument pointless: the *Phenomenology* is targeted at those who *accept* the need for transcendental explanation but *identify* transcendental conditions in *objective* terms, and it is with respect to *these* positions that it is supposed to do its work. The reason why *non-transcendental* philosophy—naturalism, scientific realism—figures centrally onstage among Merleau-Ponty's targets is that he wishes to demonstrate *to* the transcendental philosophers of objective thought—Kant, Husserl, Sartre—that their own positions are unwittingly continuous with the non-transcendental positions that they reject, i.e. that their attempts to define their positions in opposition to transcendental realism and the philosophical prejudices of the natural attitude

are only partially successful: Kant has not, Merleau-Ponty wishes to show, eradicated from his position all that the Copernican revolution was (or ought to have been) intended to overcome, while Husserl and Sartre have failed to extirpate elements of the natural attitude that their phenomenologies were intended to eliminate.

5. In Section 4 I will cite a further passage bearing out these claims, but now I want to give a textual illustration which supports this point about the scope and assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's argument from a different angle.

In 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', published shortly after the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty offers a defence of the book's main theses, and in order to give an idea of how he conceives perception, summarizes his view of the problem set by 'an object which we perceive but one of whose sides we do not see' (PrP 13). Merleau-Ponty considers three philosophical analyses of this perceptual situation:

1. 'I *represent* to myself the sides of this lamp which are not seen.'
2. 'The unseen sides are *anticipated* by me.'
3. 'The unseen sides are simply *possible perceptions*.'

Merleau-Ponty rejects these analyses because they imply that the unseen sides are *not present* for me—they suggest either that the existence of the unseen sides is *merely probable* or that my relation to them is one of *mere belief*, i.e. mediated by a truth which has been grasped in the way that we grasp truths of geometry, in place of a direct relation to an object.

What analysis does Merleau-Ponty offer in their place? What he says is this:

The unseen side is present in its own way. It is in my vicinity [. . . When] I consider the whole setting [*l'entourage*; i.e. the relation to touch, etc.] of my perception, it reveals another modality which is neither the ideal and necessary being of geometry nor the simple sensory event. (PrP 14)

What is the nature of this 'other modality'? Here all that Merleau-Ponty does is to refer us to the further details of his discussion of perception and the body in the *Phenomenology*. But to say that the unseen side is 'present in its own way' obviously does not amount to an *analysis* at all, in the sense of those that he wishes to challenge. Merleau-Ponty does not, in fact, have a *rival* explanation of the cognitive achievement; rather he is *refusing the question*.

Consequently the naturalist will regard Merleau-Ponty's argument as making no impact. But what this should really be taken to show is that Merleau-Ponty is inviting us to regard pre-objective perception as *not requiring* explanation or permitting analysis of the sort that Empiricists and Intellectualists are keen to offer—he is suggesting that we relocate it on the side of the philosophical *explanans*, and motivating this suggestion by indicating that the cost of not doing so is a reduction of the object's unseen side to a matter of mere belief. This makes full sense on the Transcendental Interpretation, since if perception *is* a ground-level transcendental condition, then it *could not* receive any explanation. The only alternative to this construal, I think, is to view Merleau-Ponty's argument here, and a great many others in the *Phenomenology*, as missing their target and as entirely beside the point. The Transcendental Interpretation may not give Merleau-Ponty an argument against the *naturalist*, but it does give him an *argument*, addressed to his transcendental predecessors.

6. I have argued that the *Phenomenology* cannot be divided into discrete steps providing a logically linear argument for the transcendental turn, but it can of course still be considered

how, *with* the transcendental framework presupposed, its argument may be intended to run. No doubt various reconstructions are possible, but the following is a rough sketch of the role played by the discussion of perception in the argument of the Introduction and Part One:

- (1) The nature of perception, correctly apprehended, invites us to consider it unanalyzable. [A phenomenological datum disclosed to phenomenological intuition in the course of the Introduction and Part One.]
- (2) Perception *qua* unanalyzable is suited to play a transcendental role, i.e. a candidate for the *explanans* in transcendental explanation. [Here the presupposed transcendental framework enters: Merleau-Ponty assumes the *need* for transcendental roles to be played, the task being to identify their occupants.]
- (3) Empiricism does not offer transcendental explanation.
- (4) Intellectualism offers an ostensibly transcendental theory, but of a kind which misrepresents the nature of perception and denies it a transcendental character. [Again, a phenomenological result of the Introduction and Part One.]
- (5) Empiricism and Intellectualism are led to affirm the analyzability of perception by their shared commitment to objective thought.
- (6) Transcendental explanation cannot take the form of—it is incompatible with—objective thought. [An argument to be examined in Section 4.]
- (7) Transcendental explanation must lie in perception conceived pre-objectively.

On this reconstruction, the key connections hold between the notions of perception's unanalyzability, transcendental role, and pre-objectivity. What should next be emphasized is that it is not for Merleau-Ponty the whole story. The Introduction and Part One cannot be

taken independently of the concluding chapters, in the context of which a much broader argument comes into view. Here is a rough reconstruction of that broader argument:

- (1) Human existence is characterized by specific forms of intersubjectivity, temporality, and freedom. [These specific forms are described in the concluding chapters, mainly on a negative basis, i.e. through criticism of naturalistic, Husserlian, Sartrean, etc., accounts of these topics.]
- (2) These specific forms of intersubjectivity, etc., cannot be grasped by means of objective thought. [As Section 4 will elaborate, Merleau-Ponty tries to show, regarding each of the topics, that objective thought necessitates various alternatives each of which is unacceptable: for example, it implies that we have either no freedom or absolute unqualified freedom à la Sartre.]
- (3) The world in general must be interpreted in a way that explains how it is possible for human existence to be such that it cannot be grasped in objective thought. [In other words: it is not coherent to affirm that *human existence* has the specific character assigned to it, unless it is also affirmed that the *world* inhabited by human subjects has an appropriate correlative metaphysical character. Therefore:]
- (4) The world in general must be interpreted as being such that it cannot be grasped in objective thought.
- (5) The world in general must repose upon pre-objective being.

There are various ways in which this argument, and that of the Introduction and Part One, may be regarded as related. The concluding chapters, and the Introduction and Part One, can be regarded as two *parallel*, mutually supporting and illuminating, arguments for the same conclusion. Or the argument of the Introduction and Part One can be regarded as *embedded*

*within* the argument of the concluding chapters—as elaborating its line (3). Or again, one could shift the whole centre of gravity to the concluding chapters and reduce the Introduction and Part One to a lengthy prolegomenon.

7. One central theme in the history of transcendental thought has been the search for internal connections between theoretical and practical philosophy, between metaphysics and the theory of value. It may appear, however, that nothing much by way of a practical theory or theory of value is contained in the *Phenomenology*, and that Merleau-Ponty forgoes the attunement of metaphysics to ethical issues trumpeted in *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*. The appearance of being concerned exclusively with questions of theoretical philosophy no doubt encourages the Psychological Interpretation to treat the *Phenomenology* as first and foremost a study in the philosophy of mind.

There is no space here to consider the issue in full, but the following brief remarks are worth making to show that Merleau-Ponty does envisage connections of the metaphysics of the *Phenomenology* with practical and axiological issues.<sup>23</sup>

In the first place, Merleau-Ponty's non-naturalistic idealist metaphysics set human existence at the centre of reality and dispose of the 'nihilist' threat posed in transcendental eyes by scientific naturalism. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty's ground-level reciprocal interweaving of self and world establishes a sense in which the human subject is fundamentally at home in the world, *bei sich*, in a way that contradicts the postlapsarian, arguably tragic or quasi-nihilistic portraits of the human condition painted by Heidegger and Sartre: for Merleau-Ponty, human being is not *constituted* by a metaphysical problem—of alienation from Being, or *manque d'être*—in the way that it is for Heidegger and Sartre.

Although Merleau-Ponty only hints at the connection (PrP 25), the *Phenomenology*'s conception of pre-objectivity provides for a primordially given unity of fact and value, akin to

what is encountered in aesthetic consciousness. Because perceptual pre-objectivity comprises not bare sensory qualia but rather contains meaning, scrutiny of the given does not drive us to suppose that value, or the source of what will come to be grasped reflectively in the form of values, is absent from it. The background value-permeation made possible by Merleau-Pontian pre-objectivity offers a foundation for moral realism (PP 456). This points away from the Psychological Interpretation: if Merleau-Ponty's conception of pre-objectivity incorporates or makes provision for value, realistically conceived, then it can hardly be *identified* with a richer conception of perceptual content.

Though Merleau-Ponty denies that determinate concrete practical implications can be *deduced* from his metaphysics, the specific forms of intersubjectivity and freedom described in the concluding chapters of the *Phenomenology* are not bereft of practical implications.<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty stands opposed, as a moral particularist, to Kantian formalism and Sartreian voluntarism (PP 456), and his account of the shared intersubjective perspective contradicts Sartre's conflictual account of human relationships: before the for-itself's Look can begin the Sartreian dialectic of mutual objectification and counter-objectification, it is necessary that self and other co-perceive themselves as *sharing* a world in which each, as embodied, is not merely intersubjectively accessible to the other but also exists freely *in concert with* the other (PP 456); self and other may elect to negate one another, but it is not metaphysically necessary that they do so, *contra* Sartre (PP 448). Again, Merleau-Ponty claims to have exhibited the inescapability of responsibility in a way that objective thought fails to do: human freedom is protected against the Empiricist's reduction of my being to that of a mere 'thing', but it is not made to rest precariously, in Sartre's Intellectualist fashion, on my 'taking up' my natural and social facticity through a metaphysical intervention undertaken from outside being (PP 456).

The practical and axiological dividends of his transcendental metaphysics comprise a further important dimension of what I have called Merleau-Ponty's broader argument, and add extra weight to the Transcendental Interpretation.

8. The next point demanding emphasis concerns Merleau-Ponty's view of the nature and limits of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's writings overflow with remarks about how ultimately philosophy can do no more than bring us to *see* how things are pre-objectively. Merleau-Ponty talks of phenomenology as 'restor[ing] the world of perception' (PrP 3), 'a method of getting closer to present and living reality' (PrP 25): '[t]rue philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world' (PP xx); philosophy must 'conform itself with the vision we have in fact', 'adjust itself to those figured enigmas, the thing and the world' (VI 4); '[p]henomenology, as a disclosure of the world, rests on itself, or rather provides its own foundation' (PP xx–xxi); it 'wishes to bring to expression' 'the things themselves, from the depths of their silence' (VI 4); 'philosophy has no other function than to teach us to see [things] clearly once more, and [. . .] comes into being by destroying itself as separate philosophy' (PP 456).

The suggestion that philosophical knowledge involves something extra-propositional cannot be missed. The further, key point is that this non-propositional something is regarded by Merleau-Ponty not merely as a necessary accompaniment or precondition of philosophical cognition, but as what philosophical cognition essentially *consists in*: having put 'the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things' 'out of play', suspending 'for a moment our recognition of them', we experience "'wonder" in the face of the world', and 'from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world'—we do no more than 'watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire' (PP xiii–xiv). Such apprehension marks the *limit* of philosophy: '[a]ll that has to be done is to recognize these phenomena which are the ground of all our certainties'; belief in 'an absolute mind' or in 'a



world in itself detached from us' is nothing more than 'a rationalization of this primordial faith' (PP 409). The rationality of our common sense certainties 'is not a *problem*', for there is nothing 'behind it' for us to determine (PP xx). We may call it a 'miracle' or 'mystery', but it is not one that leaves matters 'problematical': since 'we are ourselves' the 'network of relationships' which it establishes, 'nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked'; the mystery 'defines' the world and reason, so 'there can be no question of dispelling it by some "solution"' (PP xx). To 'establish this wonder' is 'metaphysics itself' (PrP 11).<sup>25</sup>

Merleau-Ponty thus belongs to a tradition which treats philosophical knowledge as consisting in the attainment of states of mind which consist in more than doxastic attitudes to philosophical propositions. These privileged cognitive states are in a limited sense ineffable: they can be registered linguistically, but their propositional expressions function only as indices. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty can claim, as we have seen him do, the discursive non-provability of his philosophical conclusions.<sup>26</sup> The view is also crucial for his idea that painting (Cézanne) may communicate the same content as phenomenological philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's view of the intuitive nature of philosophical cognition evidently makes a crucial difference to how the Introduction and Part One should be understood: if the Psychological Interpretation were correct, then the phenomenologist's experience of perception's pre-objectivity would be mere data, mere *evidence* for some philosophical proposition, whereas Merleau-Ponty's claim, we have just seen, is the reverse—the experience *is* the terminus *ad quem* of philosophical activity. His statement that phenomenology 'restores the world of perception' means, therefore, not just that phenomenology shows the importance of perception for philosophy, but that its practice generates in the philosopher an actual awareness of perceptual experience which the philosopher grasps as *completing* the philosophical task.

#### **4. Antinomy, idealism, and transcendental ambiguity**

1. Merleau-Ponty's extra-propositional conception of philosophical knowledge is bound up with his strategy of moving philosophy beyond the attempt to formulate discursive solutions for its perennial problems, by interpreting those problems as expressions of the inherent limitations of thought. Because this strategy is essential for grasping what exactly pre-objectivity amounts to for Merleau-Ponty, as well as providing powerful support for the Transcendental Interpretation, I will discuss it in some detail.

The strategy is best understood as a novel development of Kant's argument that transcendental idealism is uniquely capable of resolving philosophical problems which are otherwise insoluble. In the Antinomy of Pure Reason, Kant takes four topics in traditional metaphysics and in each case argues that a contradiction—e.g. both affirmation and denial that the world is finite in space and time—can be derived through valid arguments. The four antinomies exhibit a single general form of conflict in metaphysics, between dogmatic rationalism and skeptical empiricism. The rational response to this paradoxical situation, Kant argues, is to identify in each case some proposition which is presupposed by both sides but can be denied, and the denial of which eliminates the contradiction. The presuppositions of the four antinomies, according to Kant, revolve around reason's idea of the world as a determinate totality, but ultimately, he suggests, one unarticulated claim lies behind them all, namely that the objects of our knowledge are things in themselves, the defining claim of transcendental realism. On the basis that transcendental realism is sufficient as well as necessary to generate the antinomies, and that the only alternative to it is transcendental idealism, Kant claims to have provided an indirect proof of transcendental idealism.

In the following passage, Merleau-Ponty indicates the close relation between the *Phenomenology* and Kant's Antinomy of Pure Reason:

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 being. (PrP 18)

The chief contradiction which Merleau-Ponty has in mind as arising when we describe the perceived world concerns the 'relation of the perceiving subject and the world', which, he says, 'involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence', i.e. conception of the objects of perception as both immanent to acts of perception and transcendent of them (PrP 13). In this sense, 'the perceived world is paradoxical', the 'perceived thing itself is paradoxical' (PrP 16).<sup>28</sup>

Now there is no explicitly articulated argument in Merleau-Ponty which matches the formal rigour of Kant's Antinomy. Even in the concluding chapters of the *Phenomenology*, where Merleau-Ponty's antinomy-strategy is most clearly visible—as said above, opposing conceptualizations of freedom, temporality, intersubjectivity and so forth are argued in the concluding chapters to exhaust the possibilities of objective thought, clearing the field for Merleau-Ponty's thesis of pre-objective being—there is no strict attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum*; Merleau-Ponty's emphasis is on the individually unsatisfactory character of the

options presented by objective thought, not their jointly comprising strict contradictions.

Nonetheless, the Kantian connection asserted by Merleau-Ponty is easily grasped:

(i) Just as the Antinomy shows that contradictions can be avoided only if we deny identity between the given empirical world and the world *qua* object of reason, so the *Phenomenology* shows that we must deny identity between the perceived world and the world as conceived in objective thought; Kant's argument establishes that the world given in sense experience is mere appearance, Merleau-Ponty's, that it consists of pre-objective being. The conclusions drawn are opposed—pre-objective being lacks the objective-conceptual constitution of Kantian appearance—but the form and idealistic trajectory of the arguments are the same: both attempt to demonstrate a lack of fit between what is given and what is represented by our concepts, which is then argued to imply, first, that the objects of our experience lack the subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing, i.e. idealism, and second, a limitation and demotion of the power of thought, Kant's conclusion being that pure reason cannot grasp nature and Merleau-Ponty's that the perceived world eludes thought's objectification.

It is, therefore, as if Merleau-Ponty had applied to the Kantian 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. The result is a new kind of transcendental idealism, as it were a transcendental idealism of the second degree, which denies not only that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but also that the perceived world owes its reality and cognizability to the Kantian conjunction of intuition with objectivity concepts. In this way Merleau-Ponty's concept of pre-objective being can be regarded as a further development of the Kantian concept of appearance.

(ii) In both cases, venerable philosophical problems are held to have been solved, or dissolved, through being referred back from the *objects* of experience, where earlier philosophers had supposed their solution must lie, to the *subject's* power of thought, which is made to take the blame for producing contradictions. In Kant's Antinomy the relevant problems are the 'cosmological' problems of traditional metaphysics, including the key opposition of freedom and nature. Merleau-Ponty—again as it were taking Kant a step further, and applying Kant's own strategy to Kant himself—argues that *all* of the problems of epistemology and metaphysics, including those that the *Critique of Pure Reason* claims to solve, disappear in the light of the discovery of pre-objective being. The problem of the external world is dissolved with the recognition that the perceived world is 'strange and paradoxical' (PP xiii). The proper 'remedy to skepticism' in general (PrP 26) consists in accepting the perceived world as the foundation for 'all rationality', and allowing that it 'comprises relations and a type of organization' that the supervening 'world of ideas' can reflect only in the form of paradox, for which reason it is possible for knowledge to appear problematic: the paradoxes in question, which must be acknowledged as '*the very condition of consciousness*' comprise 'the justified contradictions of transcendental logic' (PrP 13, 16, 18–19). The given opposition (on which Sartre erects his metaphysics) of our mode of being, being-for-itself, to that of the objects of thought, being-in-itself, is to be treated as a function of a 'contact with being' that 'really is ambivalent' (VI 75). In the case of time, its 'ambiguity cannot be resolved, but it can be understood as ultimate, if we recapture the intuition of real time which preserves everything, and which is at the core of both proof and expression' (PP 394). The problem of other minds too, from the phenomenological standpoint, is relegated to a construct of objective thought: '[u]nder these conditions'—viz., of our pre-objective bodily and perceptual being, and correlative pre-personal selfhood—the antinomies of objective thought vanish' (PP 351); in place of a discursively formulated philosophical solution to the

problem of other minds, 'we live through', *nous vivons*, our intersubjective situation (PP 359).<sup>29</sup>

The opposition of realism and idealism is itself an antinomy of objective thought:<sup>30</sup> we 'leave behind the dilemma of realism and idealism' (PP 430), because 'the solution of all problems of transcendence' is available 'in the thickness of the pre-objective present' (PP 433). On the interpretation I am defending, this means of course that the realism/idealism opposition is subsumed in one sense, but not that Merleau-Ponty's position is in *all* senses beyond realism and idealism, since his own metaphysics recreate idealism at a higher level: the 'pre-objective present', appeal to which allows Merleau-Ponty's to position his transcendental idealism of pre-objectivity above the various oppositions of transcendental/empirical realism/idealism within objective thought, is itself an idealist notion.

Expressed in general terms, therefore, Merleau-Ponty's mode of solution to philosophical problems is to reduce them to representations produced by objective thought in its confrontation with pre-objective being; all that properly remains of them, after this structure has been grasped, is the recognition that there is in reality, i.e. in pre-objective being, an irresolvable 'ambiguity'. To the extent that the perceived world remains 'paradoxical' as opposed to merely displaying ambiguity, it is because and in so far as objective thought continues to cast a shadow; just as, according to Kant, dialectical illusion cannot be eliminated.

2. The claim that ambiguity resides in reality marks the point where Merleau-Ponty's antinomy-strategy extends beyond Kant's.<sup>31</sup> Now it must be asked what it means to say that we should not seek to 'purge' objects 'of all ambiguity' (PP 11), that 'we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon' (PP 6).

The natural place to start is with the famous Müller-Lyer lines, of which Merleau-Ponty says that they are neither of the same length nor of unequal length, and that they thereby show the presence in perception of a 'positive indeterminate' (PP 6, 11–12).

Certain construals of this claim can be ruled out immediately. Merleau-Ponty cannot simply be describing a psychological *explanandum*, nor can he have in mind a hypothesized feature of sub-personal information processing, the idea perhaps that perceptual data goes through a point at which values of relative length are not yet assigned. Nor can Merleau-Ponty *merely* be asserting that questions of length come into play only when the categories constitutive of objectivity have been applied, for this on its own would just lead to the Kantian position that intuitions without concepts are 'nothing to us', which would contradict what Merleau-Ponty wishes to claim, viz., that indeterminacy or ambiguity is *actually perceived*.

What may be said in the first instance is that, at one level and in one sense, 'ambiguity' is a way of conceiving the phenomenon that Merleau-Ponty regards as evoked *from the angle of objective thought*—ambiguity implies the co-existence of different *determinate* meanings, whereas Merleau-Ponty's own claim is that the phenomenon is *pre-* or *indeterminate*. Thus when Merleau-Ponty says that ambiguity is 'real' and yet 'denied' by objective thought, he is putting the point in the terms of the position he is attacking, in order to allege an antinomy in objective thought: his argument being that (1) the phenomenon is real, (2) objective thought can conceptualize it only as an instance in which two different and, in the Müller-Lyer case, *contradictory* determinate meanings are both realized, (3) objective thought is forced to either accept a contradiction or repudiate the phenomenon, and thereupon reveals its limitation.

The use just made of the concept of ambiguity is negative, and the next task must be to attempt to pinpoint the *positive* sense that it has for Merleau-Ponty—we need to say what it is about pre-objectivity in general that the specific ambiguity of the Müller-Lyer diagram brings

to light. The key point, I take it, is the following. The Müller-Lyer diagram *qua* pre-objective phenomenon sponsors two specific determinate judgements and to that extent Merleau-Ponty must affirm that it is *related internally* to the relevant concepts of equality and inequality of length; yet he cannot want to say that the lines as they are pre-objectively *satisfy those concepts* in the way that empirically real objects can be judged to do so. The pre-objective phenomenon thus appears to be more than a blind intuition, but less than a conceptualized intuition; our awareness of it is *not unthinking*, but it lacks the form of *judgement*. If we now confront Merleau-Ponty with Kant's Transcendental Deduction, and ask how he stands on the issue of the involvement of concepts in experience, it is obvious that there is only one thing that he can say: namely that the decompositional analysis of pre-objectivity into intuitional and conceptual components cannot be carried through.<sup>32</sup> And this is exactly what Merleau-Ponty does say, in the many places where he explains how he wants to go beyond Kant, or 'redefine' the understanding and other Kantian notions:<sup>33</sup> the conditions of experience, he insists, cannot be analysed in terms of form and content, and the opposition of 'perceptual life' and 'concept' gains application only when analytical reflection has falsely dissected the intentional tissue of sense experience (PP 53, 126–127; VI 157–158). We encounter here, as Merleau-Ponty's metaphilosophy prescribes that we should, a final limit to what reflection can deliver: all we can say is that pre-objectivity possesses a 'formed-contentuality', a 'proto-conceptuality' or whatever, which grounds concept-application but is left behind in the transition to objective-conceptual form.

We can now understand the close, two-way connection drawn by Merleau-Ponty, which is at first glance puzzling, between indeterminacy and transcendental explanation.<sup>34</sup> His claim is not that there are really, from the transcendental standpoint, no determinate empirical facts, but that the experience of indeterminacy as afforded by the Müller-Lyer diagram exhibits, in a way that ordinary sense cognition tends to conceal, the distinctive quality,



character, 'texture' or 'shape' of pre-objectivity, with which comes appreciation of its transcendental status.

This also makes clear why Merleau-Ponty's non-Intellectualist post-Kantian idealism does not relapse into empirical idealism. The ground of empirical reality for Merleau-Ponty is *pre-objective*. The empiricist's conception of experience, by contrast, is that of *unconceptualized intuition*, and this on Merleau-Ponty's account is a *derivation* from objective thought—what the classical empiricist calls 'experience' is a subjective residue scraped off the surface of a world conceived in accordance with objective thought.

3. Perceptual ambiguity or indeterminacy provides Merleau-Ponty with a general model for metaphysics. The real metaphysical ambiguity in things which generates the problems of philosophy and gives rise to opposing philosophical positions is, like the length of the Müller-Lyer lines, something that can only be intuited—in so far as we seek to take it up and articulate it in reflective judgement, we find ourselves in contradiction. This ultimately real, unanalyzable ambiguity is brute but not unintelligible, for we make it intelligible by recapturing the relevant pre-objective *Erlebnis*, by 'living' the ambiguity. Empiricism and Intellectualism may be understood on the analogy with the two judgements of the Müller-Lyer lines—Empiricism interprets the lines as having different lengths, and Intellectualism as having the same length. They are therefore not mere arbitrary mistakes: the phenomena of objective thought are 'not fictions, but firmly grounded' (PP 356). Merleau-Ponty's own metaphysical view corresponds to the conception of the diagram as exhibiting indeterminacy 'as a positive phenomenon', and his conception of the end-state of philosophical enquiry to that of perception of the lines as indeterminately both/neither equal and/nor unequal.

Whatever is made of this far-reaching development of Kant's antinomy-argument, its importance for Merleau-Ponty is beyond doubt: without it, Merleau-Ponty has no

philosophical position worth the name, and his claim to have moved philosophy beyond the solution of its traditional problems is hollow.

### 5. Phenomenology, Psychology, and Philosophy of Mind

1. It might be argued—against the Transcendental Interpretation, and contrary to what I have been assuming regarding the way that the philosophical options divide up—that the opposition of transcendental and naturalistic standpoints is not fixed in metaphilosophical stone, and that a better, more comprehensive and philosophically progressive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty will result from taking him to be aiming at a rapprochement or synthesis of transcendental philosophy with scientific psychology.<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, it may be said, turns to empirical psychology in the first instance to provide a robust anchor for phenomenological reflection, in response to the incoherence that has come to afflict the phenomenological project (PP vii), but ultimately what the *Phenomenology* teaches is that the transcendentalist/naturalist dichotomy itself is yet another antinomy of objective thought which we can see our way beyond.

If the promised synthesis of transcendentalism and naturalism could be made plausible independently—no mean feat—then it would furnish the basis for a reconstructive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, but it is not in Merleau-Ponty's own line of sight. Consider how Merleau-Ponty concludes the *Phenomenology's* Introduction:

A philosophy becomes transcendental, that is to say radical, not by installing itself in absolute consciousness without mentioning the ways in which this is reached, but by considering itself as a problem; not by postulating a total making explicit of

knowledge, but by recognizing as the fundamental philosophic problem this *presumption* on reason's part.

That is why we had to begin our examination of perception with psychological considerations. 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. We had to frequent the phenomenal field and become acquainted, through psychological descriptions, with the subject of phenomena, if we were to avoid placing ourselves from the start, as does reflexive philosophy, in a transcendental dimension assumed to be eternally given, missing the true problem of constitution. 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 [ . . . ] But 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. (PP 63)

This passage does speak of a rapprochement of philosophy with psychological *description*—transcendental philosophy is to be corrected through attention to 'psychological considerations', and psychological description is to be purged of 'psychologism' by

philosophical reflection—but what is envisaged is not the philosophical naturalist's fusion or joint partnership of philosophy with psychological *science*. The value of psychology in the sense of attention to 'psychological considerations' is as argued earlier to *reform transcendental philosophy* by freeing it from its Intellectualist misconception, and this involves no positive estimate of psychological science as an independent source of knowledge that philosophy ought to accommodate. Phenomenological conclusions do not depend for their truth, according to Merleau-Ponty, on the results of scientific psychology,<sup>36</sup> and nor does our knowledge of them.<sup>37</sup> Engagement with scientific psychology sharpens and refines our appreciation of psychological considerations, which in turn helps us to reach a position from which phenomenological truth can be grasped on the basis of an apodictic relation to the pre-objective, rendering transcendental reflection strictly independent of any application of the scientific method.

The large quantity of empirical psychology in the *Phenomenology* is therefore not a sign of its epistemological authority for philosophical purposes. On the contrary, what Merleau-Ponty wishes to see is a *transformation of psychology*—of that limited portion of it worth salvaging from Empiricism—into phenomenology.<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty tries to play down the philosophically imperialist character of his view—he says that '[p]sychology as a science has nothing to fear from a return to the perceived world' (PrP 24) and talks of freeing Gestalt psychology from its scientific misconception—but in truth what his position demands is an assimilation of the recuperable part of psychological science to philosophy, going in the opposite direction from the union of psychology with philosophy advocated by philosophical naturalism.<sup>39</sup> As rapprochements go, Merleau-Ponty's call for psychology to relate itself to phenomenological philosophy has more in common with Schelling and Hegel's positioning of *Naturphilosophie* within absolute idealism than it does with naturalism in the wake of Quine.<sup>40</sup>

2. The Transcendental Interpretation restores to the *Phenomenology* the unity that Hyppolite queries and the Psychological Interpretation denies, and explains why for Merleau-Ponty there is no question of simply advancing, from the deficiencies of their extant forms, to improved versions of Empiricist and Intellectualist theories. If the Transcendental Interpretation is right, then it is incorrect to regard Merleau-Ponty's claims about perception as open to receiving support from branches of empirical psychology. The worry that Merleau-Ponty confuses epistemological with metaphysical priority is also resolved.

In light of the Transcendental Interpretation, it can be seen how the Psychological Interpretation arises and where precisely its mistake lies. The *Phenomenology* encompasses three sorts of claims: (i) negative critical claims about philosophical and psychological theories of perception, (ii) positive metaphysical claims about perception, and sandwiched between them, (iii) an extensive web of quasi-metaphorical descriptions of perceptual experience designed to elicit phenomenological intuition, which provide a two-way bridge between the work's critical and positive metaphysical claims—descriptions like that of the unseen sides of the lamp as being 'in my vicinity'. The Psychological Interpretation is generated by interpolating in this third intermediate domain positive theses about perceptual content of the sort found in the philosophy of mind—about its non-conceptual character and so forth.

One final comment on the Psychological Interpretation may be added. Theses in the philosophy of mind concern perception as commonsensically conceived. On Merleau-Ponty's account, however, this conception is contaminated by objective thought; it is what underlies Kant's conception of perception as empirical knowledge, *Erfahrung*. It follows that for Merleau-Ponty perception as ordinarily conceived does not in the strictest sense exist. For this reason Merleau-Ponty talks of eschewing, at the beginning of philosophical enquiry, the very

concept of perception: 'We exclude the term perception to the whole extent that it already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts' (VI 157–158). What does exist—and is shown to be the true, corrected referent of our ordinary ascriptions of perceptual states—is the pre-objective phenomenon of perception. The point, then, is not merely that Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with perception as the philosopher of mind attempts to theorize it, but that Merleau-Ponty considers that there *cannot be* a theory of perception, or positive theses about perceptual content, of the sort that the philosopher of mind attempts to provide. Merleau-Ponty's thesis of perception's pre-objectivity, and the philosophy of mind's thesis of the nonconceptuality of perceptual experience, do not therefore correspond: the latter concerns *content in the subject*, and the former the *world-as-perceived*, which in no sense lies in the subject. A non-metaphysical philosophy of psychology can be culled from the *Phenomenology*, as recent commentary has demonstrated, but it has only an oblique relation to the position that Merleau-Ponty is actually arguing for.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I concentrate throughout on the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and refer to earlier and later writings for supporting considerations. Page references to the English translation of the *Phenomenology* are prefaced 'PP'; some quotations have been amended in light of the original. 'PrP' refers to 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', 'SB' to *The Structure of Behaviour*, and 'VI' to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

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<sup>2</sup> Thus Eilan suggests that Merleau-Ponty intends his theory of perceptual content 'to yield frank idealism' (1998, pp. 353–354).

<sup>3</sup> A representative sample of relevant recent work includes Dreyfus 1999 and 2005, Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999, Gallagher 1998 and 2008, Kelly 2002; see also Bermúdez 2005, Bickle and Ellis 2005, pp. 158–159, and Wider 1997, esp. pp. 134ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Gallagher 1998, p. 233, and Priest 1998, pp. 3–4. Priest describes *The Structure of Behaviour* as a 'partial anticipation' of Strawson's *Individuals*.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999, p. 118, Gallagher 1998, pp. 232–233, and Kelly 2000, pp. 162–165.

<sup>6</sup> I defend this classification in Section 4.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's phrase 'the perceived world', *le monde perçu*, is not to be understood as equivalent to either 'our perception of the world' or 'the world, as we (happen to) perceive it', in the sense that one might talk about a mountain 'as seen from the south', implying that the world is one thing and our perceptual perspective on it another; 'perceived' and 'world' compose an indissoluble unity, the 'perceived-world'.

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See Bermúdez 2005, pp. 299–303 and 315. See also Lacan's criticism, 1993, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> See Hammond, Howarth and Keat 1991, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> Relevant remarks are scattered over PP 410–411, 425–426, 428–433.

<sup>12</sup> See Dillon 1998, ch. 2, the concluding chapter of Langer 1989, and Priest 1998, pp. 224–225. Priest's broadly Kantian interpretation of Merleau-Ponty differs from mine by ascribing to him a non-idealistic, minimalist conception of the transcendental (see pp. 80, 99, 254 n3); in consequence Priest locates inconsistencies and limitations in Merleau-Ponty (see pp. 235, 238, 255 n11) which I think an idealistic interpretation avoids.

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<sup>13</sup> But not of course—as will become clear—Kant's view of the nature and grounds of transcendental necessity.

<sup>14</sup> The Psychological Interpretation, by contrast, distinguishes these more narrowly as different forms of *psychological* explanation.

<sup>15</sup> There are complications here, in so far as in none of the last three cases does Merleau-Ponty regard *all* aspects of Kant, Husserl and Sartre, by any means, as Intellectualist. The classification of Husserl as an Intellectualist, in particular, raises questions. Plausibly, Merleau-Ponty's paradigm of Intellectualism is supplied largely by French neo-Kantianism. To keep matters simple I will not pursue these issues.

<sup>16</sup> It might be conjectured that the transcendental turn which is offstage in the *Phenomenology* is regarded by Merleau-Ponty as having been effected in his earlier *The Structure of Behaviour*, and that this is supported by Merleau-Ponty's claim at SB 206 that what issues from the examination of scientific thought is a transcendental idealism. The problems with this suggestion are that *The Structure of Behaviour* does not contain a convincing argument for the transcendental position, and that Merleau-Ponty gives no sign of thinking that the *Phenomenology* relies on its argument (which would make little sense in view of the philosophical differences between the two works and the *Phenomenology*'s claim to be philosophically fundamental).

<sup>17</sup> VI 156–160.

<sup>18</sup> See PrP 19ff; and SB 219: 'it is natural for consciousness to misunderstand itself precisely because it is a consciousness of things'. Note that there are differences of emphasis in Merleau-Ponty's accounts of the formation of objective thought. In his discussion of the body at PP 94–95, where Merleau-Ponty tries to determine what has led to objective thought's conception of the body—and thus, since the body is a central transcendental condition, to the general metaphysics of objective thought—the factors that he cites have all to do with the

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scientization of common sense ways of thinking. But in other passages, such as the extremely clear account on PP 70–71, objective thought is ascribed to both science and common sense, but science plays no role at all in its *formation*, this being attributed entirely to the simple attainment of objectivity in perception, in the sense of taking things to have a subject-independent, non-perspectival existence and constitution: the 'positing of the object [...] makes us go beyond the limits of our actual experience' (PP 70), and leads to 'absolute positing' of the object, which is 'the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence' (PP 71). I take it, as Section 4 of the paper should make clear, that the second view represents Merleau-Ponty's true position.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty's distinction between pre-objective perception, and perception mediated by objective thought, has obvious affinities with, though does not strictly correspond to, Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic temporality, Sartre's distinction between consciousness and the degraded 'psychic' posited by impure reflection, as well as Husserl's original distinction between consciousness purified by the phenomenological *epoché* and consciousness interpreted according to the natural attitude.

<sup>20</sup> See VI 5–7, where Merleau-Ponty explicitly distinguishes the (non-transcendental) outlook that *accepts* the challenge of skepticism, from the deeper and correct (transcendental) approach that starts with 'the *problem of the world*', viz. 'to know precisely what the being of the world means' (VI 6). The latter may be said to 'reformulate the skeptical arguments outside of every ontological preconception' (VI 6).

<sup>21</sup> Again showing Merleau-Ponty to be aware of the difficulty is his emphasis on the obliqueness of our access to pre-objective phenomena: Though perception 'as an encounter with natural things is at the foreground of our research' (VI 158), and we 'do indeed first have to fix our gaze on what is apparently *given* to us' (VI 159), our real task consists in responding to the 'interrogation' elicited by 'margins of presence' or 'references' in our experience (VI

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159), for the universe of objective thought 'can tell us nothing' about pre-objectivity 'except indirectly, by its lacunae and by the aporias in which it throws us' (VI 157). The crucial point is that something philosophically weighty is required to redirect our attention from the 'foreground' of experience to its 'margins' and to allow the 'lacunae' and 'aporias' of objective thought to be apprehended.

<sup>22</sup> The case is different, I am about to argue, with respect to the Intellectualist.

<sup>23</sup> SB 223–234 shows Merleau-Ponty regarding the phenomenology of perception as an essential propaedeutic to moral theory.

<sup>24</sup> See PP 456, where Merleau-Ponty affirms the necessity of both 'willing freedom *for all*' and 'silence' on matters of ethical theory, and PrP 25–26.

<sup>25</sup> See also *The Prose of the World*, ch. 4, where Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that he regards awakening mystery as the end-point of philosophy, and explains how this requires philosophical reflection and differs from returning to the natural attitude. It is also made clear (pp. 123–125) that the account of objective thought which Merleau-Ponty gives in the context of *perception* is the basis for (and presupposed by) his position on (all) other things – theoretical cognition in general, holding-true, is held to have the character that it does because and only because of the original, mystery-occluding taking-up of perception by objective thought. Merleau-Ponty's conception of mystery as the terminus of philosophical reflection appears to owe much to Gabriel Marcel.

<sup>26</sup> The comparison with Fichte and Schelling's grounding of philosophical thought in intellectual intuition is worth drawing; Merleau-Ponty himself interprets Schelling's conception of intellectual intuition in terms of pre-objective perception: 'l' "intuition intellectuelle", qui n'est pas une faculté occulte, mais la perception même avant qu'elle ait été réduite en idées' (*Résumés de cours*, p. 107).

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<sup>27</sup> See 'Eye and Mind', esp. pp. 161, 166, 178–180, and 'Cézanne's Doubt', esp. pp. 14–16. In 'Metaphysics and the Novel', discussing philosophy's relation to literature, Merleau-Ponty describes philosophy as aiming to 'giv[e] voice to the experience of the world' and fulfil 'the task, not of explaining the world [...] but rather of formulating an experience of the world' (pp. 27–28).

<sup>28</sup> See also PP xiv: 'in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it'; and SB 215.

<sup>29</sup> In fact Merleau-Ponty's view of the problem of solipsism is more complicated, for he holds that the 'difficulties inherent in considering the perception of other people did not all stem from objective thought, nor do they all disappear with the discovery of' the pre-objective (PP 356). This does not, however, affect the present point, since he does hold that the problem is *partly* solved through pre-objectivity and in any case uses its *total* insolubility from the standpoint of objective thought as an argument against the latter.

<sup>30</sup> See PP 317–334, 430–433, and SB 219.

<sup>31</sup> Kant's account of empirical knowledge does not make room for positive indeterminacy in Merleau-Ponty's sense: indeterminacy enters for Kant only as a function of as-yet-incomplete determination, of the sort that, Kant says in the third *Critique*, occasions reflective judgement. Reflective judgement is constrained to realize systematic unity of *Erkenntnis*, and in principle no indeterminacies will remain at the end of the day.

<sup>32</sup> I wish to thank Christian Wenzel for comments which led me to correct my understanding of Merleau-Ponty on this issue.

<sup>33</sup> PP 49, 53, 126–127, 144, 220; see also the comments on rationality, PP xix–xx and 430, and note 39 below regarding the *a priori*.

<sup>34</sup> If classical psychology had grasped the transcendental status of the body, it would have been led to 'the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects' (PP 92).

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<sup>35</sup> See Hoeller 1993, proposing an 'intertwining' of science and philosophy in Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>36</sup> See *Résumés de cours*, pp. 117–120, where Merleau-Ponty rejects Heidegger's dismissal of science but circumscribes its philosophical contribution negatively, and p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> de Waelhens, in an introductory essay to the second edition of *Le Structure du comportement* authorized by Merleau-Ponty, describes this as 'an absolute misreading' (1963, pp. xxvi–xxvii).

<sup>38</sup> See for example PrP 23–24, and also Merleau-Ponty's account of Husserl's relation to psychology in 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man'. Kockelman 1985 takes a view of the relation between philosophy and psychology in the *Phenomenology* similar to the one I describe.

<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty's remarks on modal distinctions (in for example the passage quoted above from PrP 14 concerning the 'modality' of the unseen sides of the lamp) and on the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction (e.g. PP 220–222) are not intended to collapse those distinctions in a way that would abolish the transcendental/empirical distinction, which would plainly make nonsense of much else that he says. A careful reading of PP 220–222 shows that Merleau-Ponty's aim is once again to free the transcendental *a priori* from its Intellectualist misconception, by stressing the immanence of the *a priori* in the object: the object has the *a priori* not as an 'external', in principle separable, superadded, formal component, but as its 'latent logic' (PP 221); the *a priori* transcendental elements 'in' objects present themselves 'spontaneously' in perception, not as subjectively originated external formal impositions. Connectedly Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that philosophical reflection can through abstraction form concepts of transcendental *a priori* conditions which prescind from perception, in the way that Kant traces back the conceptual sources of the principles of possible experience to the forms of judgement. Reflected in Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the *a priori* is therefore his 'revelatory' view of philosophical cognition discussed previously. Thus

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when Merleau-Ponty says that 'there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and one of factual ones' (PP 221), he means that *there is* indeed an *a priori*, but that it cannot be determined at the level of consideration of what is necessary for thought of objectivity: grasping the *a priori* consists in the extraction of necessity from ('making explicit') concrete pre-objective experience; the *a priori* amounts to 'an absolute within the sphere of the relative' (PP 248). It is plain that the 'facts' with which Merleau-Ponty identifies the *a priori*, which incorporate a 'latent logic', are of no ordinary, naturalistic sort: 'the *fact* of sensory experience amounts to the assumption of a *form of existence*' (PP 221; italics added). Merleau-Ponty's transcendentalized conception of 'fact' is remote from any conception acceptable to philosophical naturalism, and his 'new definition of the *a priori*' (PP 220) brings him not a jot closer to philosophical naturalism than does Kant's definition.

<sup>40</sup> See note 26 regarding Schelling. Merleau-Ponty approved Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and claims Schelling as a precursor: see *Résumés de cours*, pp. 102ff and 125ff, and *Nature*, pp. 36–51. In view of Merleau-Ponty's denial that philosophical intuition can be recast in discursive systematic form and his assertion of the finality of paradox, affinities exist with German Romanticism as much as with German Idealism. This is rich territory which there is no space to explore here.

<sup>41</sup> I wish to thank Mike Martin, Jerry Valberg and others for their comments at the seminar at the University of London where an early draft of this paper was presented, and the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Philosophy Department of University College London for research leave that enabled its completion.