A Central Theme of Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy

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The untimely death of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in 1961 was a tragic loss both for philosophy and the wider world of letters. It was all the more to be deplored since it occurred at a time when he had fairly begun what was evidently to be a fundamental re-statement of his philosophy. While the chapters of that incomplete work, which have recently been published under the title *Le visible et l’invisible*, give hints of the new and clearly very important ideas which Merleau-Ponty intended to elaborate, it is not possible on the basis of such fragmentary indications to assess how significant these new departures might have proved to be. For us Merleau-Ponty must therefore remain the philosopher we had come to know through his earlier books and essays. Nevertheless, for this very reason this posthumous work has a special value, for it contains a number of luminous and penetrating treatments of themes to which Merleau-Ponty had returned again and again in the course of his philosophical career; and it thus underlines once again the essential unity of his thought. In this paper I will try to show that an understanding of one of these themes and of Merleau-Ponty’s characteristic mode of dealing with it can clarify the underlying philosophical concerns that are reflected in works like his *Phenomenology of...*

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Perception. In this way I hope it will be possible both to bring out a number of significant affinities between Merleau-Ponty and certain philosophical movements in the English-speaking world and at the same time to do justice to the highly original character of his thought.

I

Merleau-Ponty is often—and rightly—described as an existentialist and yet even a slight acquaintance with his work makes it quite plain that in a number of important respects he by no means conformed to either the popular or the academic stereotype of the existentialist philosopher. To be sure, that stereotype itself, through its dominating preoccupation with matters of ethos and mood, reflects serious misconceptions; but the fact remains that Merleau-Ponty's mind was marked by a certain coolness and fastidiousness that are in notable contrast to Sartre's passionate entrain, not to speak of Heidegger's somewhat troglodytic intellectual style. No doubt these differences were due, in part at least, to the fact that in spite of all his political radicalism and his impatience with reigning philosophical orthodoxies, Merleau-Ponty was an academic philosopher and as such was more inclined to be critical and cautious in his affirmations than are those in whom philosophical inspiration assumes the character of a natural force. Nowhere, by the way, does this critical skill and somewhat detached dialectical virtuosity appear to better advantage than in his dissection of Sartre's Marxism in Les aventures de la dialectique.

These distinctive features of Merleau-Ponty's intellectual style reflect deeper differences of substance. Thus Merleau-Ponty does not appear ever to have been influenced in any very important way by the "dark" philosophers of the nineteenth century—whether Kierkegaard or Nietzsche—whose intransigent vision of

the human condition was to become such an important element in the thought of Heidegger. The significance of this fact may not be readily evident. While it is widely agreed at the present time that what we call existentialism represents a confluence of a number of distinct lines of thought and that among these the most important are Husserlian phenomenology and the critiques of rationalism carried out by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the relationship to one another of these very diverse ingredients is not always well understood. More specifically, it needs to be recalled that the internal dialectic of Husserl's own philosophy had generated difficulties which some of his followers—such as Heidegger—felt to be so serious that they could be resolved only by a quite radical reorientation for which the voluntarism of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard provided the principal models. So different, however, did the philosophical idiom and ethos of the new "existential" phenomenology inspired by these sources prove to be from those of Husserl that its origin as a response to questions that can be understood only within the context of Husserl's philosophy was often obscured. In Merleau-Ponty's writings by contrast, the line of development out of and beyond Husserl is much more easily visible, precisely because his disagreements with Husserl took the form of detailed counteranalyses and counterarguments addressed to some of the latter's major theses and not, as was the case with Heidegger, the form of a massive replacement of one philosophical idiom by another. The fact that Merleau-Ponty maintained a continuing contact with Husserl's philosophical position even while departing from it on important points, is in turn at least partly due, I suggest, to the absence of strong competing intellectual allegiances of the kind I have noted in the case of Heidegger. It is surely significant that in place of the latter's reflections on Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty has given us essays on such figures as Machiavelli and Montaigne. These writers had their own comments to make on the power and scope

5. Also in *Signs*. 
of human reason but their scepticism was of an older and more
detached kind that certainly seeks to moderate the overweening
pretentions of reason but remains quite alien in spirit to the type
of superheated counterassertion that was later to become the
characteristic mode for attacks on established forms of rational-
ism.

In two other respects, Merleau-Ponty differs significantly from
other major figures in the existentialist movement. First, he was
deply versed in and indebted to the behavioral sciences, notably
psychology. No doubt the antiscientific bias of existentialism
has been exaggerated in popular accounts, but the fact remains
that Heidegger and Sartre have not been prepared to jeopardize
the independence and self-sufficiency of their own systems of
thought by resting any part of their argument on results achieved
through scientific investigations as Merleau-Ponty did by drawing
so heavily on the work of the Gestalt psychologists in his theory
of perception. In general, he was not at all disposed to accept
any hard and fast principle of the division of labor between
philosophy and the natural sciences of the kind postulated by
Husserl; and he repeatedly challenged the cognate distinction
between "essential truths" and "matters of fact" on the ground
that, in the absolute form in which it is usually advanced, it
conspicuously fails to do justice to the complex and reciprocally
fructifying relationship of interdependence in which philo-
sophical analysis and scientific inquiry stand to one another.6

The other feature of Merleau-Ponty’s thought which sets him
apart from other existentialists is perhaps the most important of
all. I have in mind his strong insistence on the philosophical
centrality of social considerations, whether in the context of an
effort to understand scientific inquiry or morality or to elaborate
a general theory of mind. After Merleau-Ponty’s death, Sartre
was to recall that even in the earliest days of their association,
when Sartre himself was caught up in what he later came to re-

6. A good statement of Merleau-Ponty’s views on the relation of philos-
ophy and the special sciences is contained in his essay “Phenomenology and
the Sciences of Man,” reprinted in The Primacy of Perception, ed. James
Edie (Evanston: 1964), especially pp. 61-78.
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gard as a very misleading form of moral individualism and was resolutely uninterested in the social and political context of philosophical reflection, Merleau-Ponty was already a political realist and tended to discount all purely individualistic forms of moral idealism. In his later philosophical work, he laid great stress on the positive and essential contribution that is made to the individual's effort to encompass and understand his world by the shared meanings that society places at his disposal; and he appears never to have been inclined to treat all forms of collective or cooperative action as so many derogations from the pristine authenticity of the purely individual project. As a result he was spared the necessity of sharply correcting in mid-career his theory of society and of history as Sartre has felt obliged to do by reason of the exaggerated and one-sided individualism which he now imputes to his earlier thought.

These differences which I have been noting and which might be interpreted by some as placing Merleau-Ponty outside the mainstream of existentialism seem to me to have a quite opposite effect. I would argue that by virtue of being relatively untouched by a number of the intellectual influences that were to contribute to the forming of present-day existentialism Merleau-Ponty's writings afford us a much clearer insight into some of the underlying and, in a narrower and more technical sense, philosophical issues which were of crucial importance in the emergence of existential phenomenology but which have been obscured by a somewhat meretricious "existentialist" rhetoric. The prominence of epistemological and conceptual issues within his philosophy undoubtedly has much to do with its close contact with Husserlian phenomenology, which I have already noted. Indeed, it could be argued that this contact was too close since it often led Merleau-Ponty to interpret some of Husserl's doctrines, particularly the theory of the Lebenswelt of his later years, in a way

8. See, for example, his Humanisme et Terreur (Paris: 1947), in which he went so far as to present a defense of the Moscow trials of the thirties.
that forces the points of similarity with the views Merleau-Ponty himself was developing at the expense of the manifest and important differences between them.\textsuperscript{9} In any case, while Husserl’s phenomenology undoubtedly provided the major themes to which Merleau-Ponty was to devote such an immense labor of reinterpretation and revision, it did so not so much because it was the most considerable contemporary re-statement of an essentially Cartesian philosophy of mind, but rather because Husserl, for all his acknowledgement of a debt to Descartes as the discoverer of “transcendental subjectivity,” had also, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, indicated how the deep-seated vices of the Cartesian philosophy might be overcome. Merleau-Ponty was himself a lifelong student of Descartes and had been reared in an academic tradition in which the root assumptions of both philosophy and psychology still reflected a Cartesian conception of mind. In France, during the years up to the World War II—or so it seemed to Merleau-Ponty and to Sartre—an uncritical and often unwitting Cartesianism with heavy infusions of Kantian idealism still dominated academic philosophy. This pervasive neo-Cartesian style of thought is often referred to in Merleau-Ponty’s writing—sometimes as what he calls “la pensée réflexive,” sometimes as “intellectualism”—and it is always the object of very severe criticism. Perhaps “critical idealism” would be the best general description for this type of philosophy, which found its most distinguished French representative in Léon Brunschvicg—a thinker almost unknown outside of France but of considerable importance if one wishes to understand the kind of philosophy against which both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre were to react so strongly.

For some reason very little if any attention is paid in most accounts of existentialism to this immediate philosophical background; and yet it has a special importance for philosophers in the English-speaking world. For while closely parallel figures in Anglo-American philosophy are not easy to identify, “critical

\textsuperscript{9} This is not to deny that Merleau-Ponty was aware of these differences, as, for example, the footnote at the end of Part II of Phenomenology of Perception makes very clear.
idealism" is by no means an exclusively French or continental doctrine, and when allowance is made for differences in philosophical idiom, many of its central tenets to which Merleau-Ponty's critique addresses itself can be seen to have a clear affinity with certain forms of phenomenalism that are familiar to us from our own recent philosophical past. There are of course very important differences between Anglo-American phenomenalism and critical idealism. Nevertheless, it is impossible to read Merleau-Ponty without being struck again and again by the similarity of his arguments to many of those that have been directed against the sense-datum theory as argued by such philosophers as C. I. Lewis and H. H. Price. When one recalls how important a role radical and systematic criticism of such views has played in the current phase of philosophical development in the English-speaking world, it becomes plausible to suggest that two movements of reaction against what is in many respects a single philosophical position may have something more in common. I will return to a consideration of this possibility later in this paper.

One more general observation is appropriate before turning to a more detailed characterization of the philosophical position to which I have been alluding. While it has often been noted that existentialism is in large part a revolt against philosophical idealism, the idealism in question is usually supposed to be Hegel's; and the form and motives of the criticism to which it is subjected by existentialists are most frequently identified with those of Kierkegaard. Seen in this light, the objectionable features of idealism are its cosmic complacency and its refusal to recognize the discreteness and contingency of individual lives, which it takes into account only as so many interrelated and ultimately harmonious ramifications of the world spirit in its self-constituting activity. An interpretation of existentialism as a protest against a world view of this kind understandably enjoys wide acceptance and appeal, since an analogy between the world-spirit with its totalitarian pretensions and certain political systems can easily be drawn; and the existentialist is thereby made to appear as the critic not just of a system of philosophy but of
tendencies in the modern world which are still very much with us and are by no means confined to the social systems that we normally called totalitarian.

The fact is that Hegel's is not the only possible form of idealism, nor are the faults of idealism as a moral or social philosophy the only targets of existentialist criticism. Specifically, the kind of critical idealism to which I have proposed Merleau-Ponty's philosophy should be seen as a reaction is motivated primarily by epistemological and logical considerations rather than by moral or social or theological prepossessions; and the same holds true for existentialism insofar as it takes the form of a critique of such a doctrine. There may well be affinities between a certain position on epistemological issues and some of the characteristic theses of idealism as a general worldview; and a case can be made for the view that the Cartesian method eventually leads to a position like Hegel's. However that may be, the fact remains that the epistemological and logical inspiration of the existentialist movement has long since been lost from sight through an almost exclusive preoccupation with some of the larger and (at least superficially) more comprehensible theses which it is thought of as defending. A study of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, by contrast, has the advantage of permitting us to reverse this rather dubious order of priority and to consider these root issues without being reminded at every turn of the vast ideological commitments which, one way or another, we are incurring.

II

The main features of the philosophy of critical idealism can be exhibited by recapitulating a certain dialectic between sense experience and conceptual thought that figures prominently in the writings of its leading representatives. The starting point for

10. In this section I have sought to reproduce a typical movement of thought such as can be found, for example, in Brunschvicg's *La vie de l'esprit*, but I have also drawn heavily on Husserl's *Ideas*, particularly in my characterization of the transcendental ego that emerges from the process of reflection.
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this dialectic is typically the notion of a sense datum, i.e., of the presence to consciousness of some quality that is usually held to be internally simple and the apprehension of which is necessarily veridical—if only because of its rigidly delimited scope. This sense datum does not have to be thought of as the sensory core of our actual experiences and can simply be postulated as the ideal residue of a process of reductive analysis in the course of which all references to what is not presently given are somehow pared away or discounted. While the classical empiricists argued that all objects of empirical knowledge must be constructed out of these units of pure sensation by means of just a few simple relationships such as contiguity and resemblance, the next step in the critical idealist's argument is to point out how far such an incorrigible apprehension of a sense datum or indeed of any momentary collection of such sense-data falls short of what we ordinarily mean by the perception of objects. Since no criteria of transtemporal identity apply to the sense datum, an apprehension of it cannot give us any objective or "public" quality, much less the object to which such a property belongs or any part of that object. How then is this gap between the sense datum and the perception of objects to be spanned? Clearly, by an act of judgment which interprets the datum as a quality of a certain kind of object which is in turn situated in an objective milieu of some kind. The making of this judgment is a distinctive form of mental activity and the content of the judgment consists of the concepts whose function it is to transform the apprehension of sense data into a perception of stable public objects. In our ordinary experience this distinction between passivity and activity—between the presence of a sense datum and the interpretation that is added by the application of a concept—is not at all clearly recognized. Precisely for this reason, the first objective of critical idealism must be to establish that distinction securely and thereby to make it impossible for common sense to persevere in its conviction that "things" are simply there and that all their characteristics, from the sensuous to the categorial, can simply be read off by means of the familiar procedures of empirical observation.
At this stage in the critical idealist's analysis, the concepts we use in judgment and indeed those judgments themselves are still understood as referring beyond the sense datum and beyond all our mental activities to an object that exists by itself and against which the content of such judgments must be tested. It is clear, however, that once we have committed ourselves to an interpretation of perception as the application of a concept to a sense datum, the possibility of such a test or comparison as this implies is called into question. In such a comparison, the terminal apprehension of the object itself would have to be analyzed as itself involving the application of a concept to a sense content, and in this way the object itself would be fatally drawn into the ambit of our activity of conceptual interpretation instead of serving as an independent touchstone by which the latter might be tested. In other words, it becomes clear that all reference to objects is conceptually mediated and that there is no set of privileged comparison objects the apprehension of which would not require such mediation. Stated somewhat less cautiously, this conclusion amounts to saying that the only objects with which we have any commerce and of which we can have any knowledge are intentional objects—objects which, as Husserl says, we constitute by means of concepts or meanings—and that the world itself is simply the total intentional object. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the world becomes the concept "world."

This reversal of perspective by virtue of which all objects become no more than so many points of intersection in the network of our conceptual activity in fact represents the outcome of the phenomenological reduction as Husserl describes it. In the course of that reduction the perceptual acceptance of the world that is characteristic of what Husserl calls the "natural attitude" is progressively modified through a growing awareness of the part we play in the constitution of objects, and finally the world is reduced to the status of the intentional correlate of that

11. See Husserl's statement in Ideen, I (Husserliana, III sec. 135 [The Hague: 1950], 329) that "all the real and ideal realities which fall under the reduction are represented in the phenomenological sphere by the total manifolds of meanings and propositions that correspond to them."
meaning-conferring activity. If I may be permitted to describe that process in a manner that is at once too Hegelian and too oriented toward language to be entirely faithful to Husserl's meaning, I would say that the movement from the natural to the transcendental attitude is one through which I gradually come to appreciate the fact that I am, so to speak, the owner and operator of a total conceptual system. This requires, as the late John Austin said, "a prising of language off the world," i.e., a break with the naive conceptual realism that submerges conceptual and meaning-conferring activity in the flux of experience; and it leads through an appreciation of the unity of the systems of meaning which we have, as it were, been unconsciously applying to an understanding of the thoroughgoing parallelism between the various forms of objectivity and the intentional acts by which they are constituted. In the course of this reinterpretation of our relationship to the world, our conception of ourselves necessarily undergoes a profound modification since we are forced to distinguish between ourselves as particular existents in the world with a definite spatiotemporal location and a limited range of knowledge and perception and our "transcendental" selves for which the empirical self is just one object among the objects that fall within the purview of the total system of reference over which the transcendental self presides. This "new" self is of course derived from the old empirical self through a process of redescription and reconceptualization in the light of all the distinctions that are implicit in our total conceptual scheme; and from this process it emerges as the transcendental agent that operates and applies the total conceptual system. In the final apotheosis of transcendental subjectivity, I even overcome the condition of finite selfhood by constituting a milieu of transcendental intersubjectivity in which the perspectives of different individual human beings are harmoniously related to one another to form a single public world that is the true correlate of the system of meanings we employ.

In many respects the outcome of the process of radical reflection which I have been describing is similar to forms of phenomenalism which are familiar in the English-speaking philosophical world. In both cases the underlying motive of the
analysis is to avoid all forms of representationalism and dualism and to exhibit the object of knowledge as ideally arrayed through the whole series of its perceptual variations before a pure consciousness. In both cases there is a determination to explicate every feature of our original perceptual relationship to the world and every mode of objectivity with which we are confronted in terms of immanence, i.e., in terms of relationships that can be traced out among the intentional or conceptually delineated objects of our mental acts. Thus reality comes to be defined in terms of a certain convergence or coherence among our ideas, and, as Merleau-Ponty says, perception becomes simply a "pensée de percevoir"—a special case of that "inspection d'esprit" before which all forms of objectivity must present their credentials. When a reference to something that transcends or remains opaque to consciousness seems to be involved in the un-criticized experience of everyday life, it is shown by reflective analysis to be merely an anticipation of a later term in the series of my possible experiences; and the apparent opening of consciousness on something distinct from itself or its immanent object turns out to be no more than a special configuration within the sphere of phenomenal immanence itself. One important difference must, however, be noted. In a phenomenalism of the Husserlian type, there is no tincture of any disposition to reduce or to eliminate ideal and abstract terms of thought in favor of constellations of sense data. Essences or, as I would prefer to call them, concepts are not all formed by abstraction from sense particulars, and they are just as capable of being objects of consciousness as are sense contents. Indeed in Husserl's view

12. An especially dramatic statement of this conclusion occurs in Husserl's *Transendentale u. Formale Logik* (Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Phänomenologische Forschung [Halle: 1929], X, 208), where it is laid down that "there is no conceivable point at which the life of consciousness could be penetrated and we would come upon a transcendence which would have a meaning other than that of an intentional unity appearing within the subjectivity of consciousness itself."

13. For a brilliant analysis of Husserl's view that meanings can be given, see H. Asmussen's *Strukturanalytische Probleme der Wahrnehmung in der Phänomenologie Husserls*, Kant-Studien (Ergänzungsheft), 1957, especially pp. 70–77.
the latter arrange themselves into meaningful forms of objectivity only to the degree that we dispose of such abstract concepts as those of "material object," "quality," "relationship," etc.

This then is the final version that critical idealism gives of our relationship to the world. In Merleau-Ponty's words,

Mettant en face de l'esprit, foyer de toute clarté, le monde réduit à son schema intelligible, une réflexion conséquente fait évanouir toute question touchant leur rapport, qui est désormais de corrélation pure: l'esprit est ce qui pense, le monde est ce qui est pensé. . . . Ainsi avec la corrélation de principe de la pensée et de l'objet de pensée s'établit une philosophie qui ne connait ni difficultés, ni paradoxes, ni renversements: une fois pour toutes j'ai saisi en moi avec la pure corrélation de celui qui pense et de ce qu'il pense la vérité de ma vie, qui est aussi celle du monde et celle des autres vies.14

In short, the world has been assimilated to the status of an object of knowledge and while we are of course unable to overcome in practice all the latencies and lacunae that characterize the actual state of our knowledge, we at least know what conditions that fully constituted and displayed object would have to satisfy. Because we can thus anticipate the movement of our knowledge toward its ideal goal, we thereby constitute ourselves in advance as the kosmocéphros for whom the world is in fact no more than an intentional object. For such a being no question can arise respecting his relation to the world or his presence in it, because all the familiar modes of attachment to a place and a time, to a body and a situation, by virtue of which we are incarnate

14. "By setting over against one another the world which has been reduced to its intelligible schema and mind which is the locus of all clarity, a consistent philosophical deliberation in effect suppresses all questions about their relationship to one another—a relationship which must henceforth be treated as one of pure correlation. Mind is what thinks, the world is what is thought. . . . In this way by virtue of a correlation in principle of thought and the object of thought a philosophy is established which recognizes no difficulties or paradoxes or reversals. In this pure correlation of that which thinks and of that which is thought I have grasped once and for all the truth of my life which is also the truth of the world and of other lives" (Le visible et l'invisible, p. 71). Such passages as this inevitably recall the sections of Wittgenstein's Tractatus in which the "I" of solipsism is described. See especially para. 5.6.
beings, will have been “objectified” and thus transformed into objects of knowledge which can no longer bind or restrict a cosmic spectator whose relationship of belonging to the world has been replaced by a “survol du monde.”

III

Merleau-Ponty was not of course the first French philosopher in this century to express radical dissatisfaction with “intellectualism,” and the criticism to which he was to subject it has a superficial similarity to that of Bergson. It is not surprising, therefore, that just as Bergson was attacked as an irrationalist, so Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the pretentions of critical idealism has been misunderstood as a repudiation of reason in favor of some ill-defined “life” or “experience.” In fact, any such animus against theoretical reason by reason of its movement away from our primary perceptual contact with the world is wholly lacking in Merleau-Ponty’s case, as I have already indicated; and in contrast to Bergson the point of his critique is not to show that conceptual thought necessarily involves a distortion of a reality to which we have access only in pure intuition. Instead, his primary philosophical concern is to show that, through the medium of critical idealism, theoretical reason can give no satisfactory account of its own genesis and development and that it falls into very serious errors when, at the prompting of that philosophy, it describes our primary perceptual experience of the world, out of which all scientific activity develops, as simply a confused and indistinct form of the rapport of consciousness to reality which is clearly explicated at the level of reflective analysis.

L’illusion des illusions est de croire à ce moment qu’en vérité nous n’avons jamais été certain que de nos actes, que depuis toujours la perception a été une inspection de l’esprit, et que

15. See, for example, the comments that followed the presentation of Merleau-Ponty’s paper “The Primacy of Perception” to the Société Française de Philosophie which are reprinted in The Primacy of Perception, trans. James Edie (Evanston: 1964), pp. 27–42.
When perception and our precritical experience of the world are thus assumed to be simply somewhat confused or blurred equivalents of the relationship of a fully constituted subject to a fully constituted object, there can be no serious philosophical motive for an inquiry into any structures of perceptual experience that may be distinctive and peculiar to it. And yet just such an inquiry is needed—a kind of second-level reflection or "surréflexion" in which the movement of conceptual thought away from the original perceptual matrix is examined without assuming that the former somehow gives us the truth of the latter. When Merleau-Ponty spoke of the primacy of perception, he was expressing his deeply rooted belief that the ultimate bearer of the vast conceptual apparatus we call science is the human animal that is situated at a definite point in space and time and perceives the world with its body. If so, the task of philosophical reflection must be to help us to understand human reason, in its full range of diverse and sophisticated forms, as so many modes of orientation within a fundamental relationship to the world which we cannot understand by a retroactive application to it of the methods and concepts of the sciences that grow out of it. The characteristic vice of most philosophical theories of perception—what Merleau-Ponty calls "le préjugé du monde"—is that they set out from certain unquestioned assumptions with respect to the nature of the object of perception as we have come to know it through subsequent scientific investigation and then

16. "The supreme illusion is to believe on reaching this level of reflection that in truth we have never been certain of anything but our own (mental) acts and that perception has always been a mental intuition; and that reflection is simply perception coming back to itself—a conversion of a knowledge of things into a knowledge of self that was implicit in it, the emergence of a synthesizing agent that was the synthesis itself" (Le visible et l'invisible, p. 59). There is an obvious similarity between this "illusion" and Leibniz's assimilation of perception to thought for which he was so severely censured by Kant.
seek to understand human consciousness on the model of the fully explicit intellectual activity that is the mental counterpart of such fully constituted objects. As a result, the characteristic features of our perceptual experience are explained as a mélange of sense impressions and conceptually mediated "inferences" along the lines described above through a generalized application to the whole of our perceptual experience of the contrast between observation and inference with which we are familiar at the level of explicit intellectual activity. The animating intention of Merleau-Ponty's whole philosophy is quite simply to challenge the propriety of this retroactive application to perception of models drawn from the domain of judgment and conceptual thought; and by breaking the compulsive hold this model has established over philosophical treatments of perception Merleau-Ponty seeks to free us for the task of describing anew the distinctive structures of the perceptual milieu.

The philosophical position from which Merleau-Ponty hopes to work out a more satisfactory account of perception is in an important sense intermediate between the critical idealism he wishes to correct and the straightforward physicalism which he was far too much of a Cartesian ever to consider seriously. Thus on the one hand he argues, with Husserl, that the world of science is not fully intelligible unless its relationship to human subjectivity has been exhibited; and he certainly holds, against the physicalist, that mental acts are distinct from brain function and that they in fact occur. At the same time, however, he insists that the perceptual experience to which the world of science is to be related is in no sense the pure consciousness of the detached Cartesian spectator, but rather the perspective on the world of a creature that is in the world in a sense that cannot be rendered by any phenomenalistic analysis of the knowledge relationship. Thus at one and the same time, Merleau-Ponty accepts the Cartesian and Husserlian gambit and requires that all our knowledge of the world authenticate itself within an autonomous milieu of consciousness and then proceeds to describe that milieu itself in terms that often seem to identify it with a certain relationship of the human body to its natural environment. Clearly,
if a contradiction is to be avoided, Merleau-Ponty must find a way of distinguishing between the body and its natural environment as these are described and explained in the scientific account of the world—which must not, he argues, be assumed in our theory of perception—and the body and the world as these appear in the context of his own account of perception. Whether this distinction can be satisfactorily worked out is, I suggest, one of the most critical questions that arise for any final appraisal of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, but it is also one that lies outside the scope of this paper.¹⁷

Since Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception is to such a large extent a corrective for mistaken approaches to the subject, it will be useful to review briefly the criticisms he makes of intellectualistic theories of perception and the alternative views he proposes. These criticisms deal with the perception of natural objects as well as with our perception of our own bodies and of other persons; and in each case Merleau-Ponty argues that the errors of critical idealism spring from an effort to interpret perception in such a way that it progressively absorbs into itself the context within which it would ordinarily be thought of as taking place. To begin with the perception of objects, it is a fact, as the critical idealist so often points out, that even when I am most confident that I am actually perceiving a material object, I see only one or two sides of it and the rest remain hidden. If I am led to reflect upon perception, I may well be persuaded by arguments that turn on the similarity of illusory and veridical perceptions, to modify my initial confidence that the object itself is what I see and to declare instead that I directly apprehend only one of its perspectival aspects. Moving farther along this track of reasoning, I may then argue that the residual "unseen" sides of the object I am looking at are no more than the series of perspectival "views" of it that I could obtain. Even if my analysis of the original perception of the object recognizes a certain nonsensuous directedness or intentionality—a pointing beyond what

¹⁷. It is clear from the working notes that this is one of the major problems to which Merleau-Ponty intended to address himself in Le visible et l'invisible.
is given to what is not given—this referential component of my perception can itself be taken "neat," i. e., just as a phenomenon, disjoined from that to which it is a reference. The result of this sequence of reductions is that the object will no longer be thought of as present now as the real terminus of my "seeing." It has been broken up into the "visual thing" and the "tactile thing," and as such it is distributed through the temporal series of my experiences. From being an element in the environment within which my perception occurs, it has become a certain set of relationships among units of experience which are defined in terms of what an illusory and a veridical perception have in common, and the apprehension of which is therefore logically prior to and independent of the distinction between veridical and non-veridical apprehensions of an objective state of affairs.

Merleau-Ponty's arguments against a phenomenalistic analysis of perception are too detailed and too variegated to be adequately summarized here. Many of them are psychological in character and challenge the propriety of treating sense data, which are evidently the end result of an elaborate series of reductive operations upon ordinary perceptual experience, as though they represented our primary mode of apprehension of material objects. Other arguments are intended to show that the very analyses by which the phenomenalistic case is made covertly employ the prereflective distinction between veridical and non-veridical perception and cannot therefore claim to replace it. But perhaps the most significant challenge that Merleau-Ponty offers to the phenomenalists is his argument that the phenomenological reduction can be complete only if it makes use of assumptions that no pure description of our experience can yield by itself. As I have already noted, an exhaustive reduction would require that the referential and self-transcending movement of natural perception be taken just as it is given phenomenally, i. e., as a referring but without its referent. But to de-

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18. This point is well made in Hubert Dreyfus, "Husserl's Phenomenology of Perception" (unpublished Harvard doctoral thesis, 1964); there the whole relationship between Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception is explored.
scribe it in isolation from that to which it is a reference is surely to alter it in a crucially important respect insofar as such a description is possible at all. If that alteration and the shift away from the natural attitude of perceptual acceptance that it entails are then justified by arguing that the referent could only be some future sequence of experiences of the object in question, then the credentials of the theory on which this assumption is based need to be presented, and it must be shown on what grounds this theory can claim to override and correct the deliverance of pre-critical experience. If no such grounds can be presented—as Merleau-Ponty plainly believes—then perception will have to be described as a much more radical form of self-transcendence than any series of possible experiences could possibly yield; and the nonequivalence of existential judgments and statements about such series will have been established. This nonequivalence is in fact the point of the existentialists' distinction between being and essence which has been widely misunderstood, perhaps because critics have taken too literally some of the highly figurative language that the existentialists have used in expounding the irreducibility of things to the phenomenal qualities by which we know them.  

If, in spite of important differences of philosophical idiom, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the perception of objects moves along lines parallel to Anglo-American discussions of the same themes, some of his most original ideas have to do with the role of the body in perception. Since Descartes, it has been a crucial step in the isolation of the transcendental ego to argue that my body, in spite of its apparently unique position, is no more than one object among other objects and that as such it is just as susceptible of reductive phenomenalistic analysis as any other body. It has also been generally agreed that standard methods of causal explanation are in principle perfectly applicable to "my"  

19. It should be noted that the existentialists distinguish between "being" and "existence" and also between both these terms and "essence." "Being" is the term they most frequently use in speaking of things to convey what might be called their "extraphenomenal" ontological status. "Existence" tends to be reserved for "conscious human existence," and "essence" applies to both phenomenal qualities and concepts.
body; and in this way my relationship to my body is definitively assimilated to my relationship to other objects of knowledge. Even when Husserl points out that it is an essential feature of all my perceptions of the world that my body is always "co-present," he shows no disposition to distinguish between the way in which my body is apprehended and the way other objects are. As Merleau-Ponty points out, however, the result of this traditional Cartesian treatment of the body as an object among objects is to generate grave problems concerning the role of the sense organs in perception. It becomes just an empirical fact that I cannot see unless I have eyes; and since the relationship of physiological functions to acts of consciousness is entirely external and contingent, true "seeing" must always remain an act performed by the "eye of the mind" which in itself bears no mark of an essential relationship to the organs of sense.

Merleau-Ponty's criticism of this conception of the body, like his criticisms of phenomenalism generally, are often psychological in character and draw extensively on the studies that have been made of the body image in both normal and pathological cases. His intention is of course to show how very far our ordinary experience of our bodies is from conforming to this phenomenalistic and intellectualistic model. In this connection he repeatedly lays great emphasis on the fact that objects are normally perceived in the context of an activity of the body; and he insists that this feature of perception, which has been so solidly established by empirical psychological investigations, cannot be adequately translated into the Cartesian language of mental acts of association and interpretation. Important as these psychological discussions are to Merleau-Ponty's argument, he also has a number of distinctively philosophical points to make against the phenomenalistic treatment of the body as simply one object of a single, standard kind of knowledge. Thus he raises the question

20. I am not unmindful of the fact that in Ideen II Husserl presented detailed analyses of the experience of one's own body and of the bodies of others and of the differences between the two, but I could also argue that at no point does he depart from a basically phenomenalistic treatment of both types of experience.
of how the kind of limitation implied by our inescapably perspectival knowledge of objects could ever be imposed on a consciousness as completely independent of its body as the phenomenalists suppose it to be. At a deeper level Merleau-Ponty is arguing that references to the body and its various possible dispositions remain logically primitive; and he is making much the same kind of point against phenomenalism that has been made by those philosophers who point out that the presently nongiven terms in the series of my representations can be actualized only by carrying out certain bodily movements. We can of course attempt to close the circle by translating these references to the body into phenomenalistic language, but we can never absorb entirely all references to some state of the body that is in fact a condition for the sequence of experiences that is being projected. As I read him, Merleau-Ponty is making a case not just for what I have called the logical primitiveness of these references to the body, but also for the epistemological distinctiveness of the type of knowledge they represent. Again a parallel to recent Anglo-American discussions suggests itself—in this case to the attempts that have been made to gain recognition for what is called our “non-observational knowledge” of what we are doing at any given time.\(^{21}\) For Merleau-Ponty the kind of assurance with which we can declare our intentions, and which is evidently not the result of observations such as we institute in the case of external objects, reflects an apprehension of our bodies in terms of a schema of action which is also a mode of orientation within our natural environment.

The problem of our perception of other conscious beings has always been the most serious obstacle in the way of a thoroughgoing application of the phenomenalistic thesis to all objects of knowledge. It is a problem that was not recognized in its full seriousness by the classical writers in the Cartesian tradition; and while Hume was prepared to accept a theory of the self as a

construction out of bits of mental content, he proposed no comparable theory of other selves as compounded out of my possible impressions and ideas. The difficulty of the problem and the radical discontinuity it introduces into our system of the world are appreciated fully only when I bear in mind that the alien consciousness I postulate as somehow existing beyond "its" body is not only in principle unincorporable into any smooth sequence of experiences that I might have, but also has to be defined as a consciousness of the same objects and the same world which I progressively explicate in phenomenalistic terms.\textsuperscript{22} To be sure, the body of the other presents no difficulties and can be treated in exactly the same way as I treat my own, i.e., as a natural object governed by natural laws and comprehensible in terms of the same sort of causal regularities as any other object. But the very facility with which we can deal with the body of the other only aggravates the difficulty of somehow fitting the other, as a consciousness that is radically distinct from its body, into our world. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, the only solution for the hopeless problems generated in this way is to assert that human beings "meet" only in the sense and only to the extent that an ideal coincidence of their "theories of the world" can be assumed; and in both the Leibnizian and the Hegelian form, doctrines of this kind have proved notably fertile in paradoxes. In any case, they uniformly require that we give up all ideas of a concrete perceptual encounter with another sentient being and indeed the notion itself of "seeing" another person.

It is precisely this character of a direct encounter with other conscious beings that Merleau-Ponty wished to restore to an important place in the philosophical theory of perception. As in the case of our perception of material objects, so in the case of our perception of other persons, we meet something that is not exhausted by the mental act through which it is apprehended; but

\textsuperscript{22} Husserl was, I think, the first philosopher to give prominence to the role of intentionality in our concept of other conscious beings and to stress the fact that an alien consciousness is not just a collection of mental contents but also a referential relationship to the same objects which I experience. See Cartesian Meditations, trans. Cairns (The Hague: 1960), pp. 120--28; and Ideen, II, Husserliana (The Hague: 1952), 168--69.
the two cases involve quite different types of transcendence. When I recognize the reality of another point of view on the same world that I have already perceived and construed in a certain way, what I recognize is not just another transcendental spectator whose "cosmological eye" reflects the same fully constituted object or world that I have already in view, but rather a quite concrete—because incarnate—system of actions and intentions that may run athwart or reinforce my own. In any case I am made inescapably aware that I and my world form the objects of an independent appreciation and one that is made not by an absolute and disengaged spectator but by an agent that is situated in the same world as I and comprehends it, as I do, through schemata of action. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the failure of philosophers to deal adequately with "other minds" is simply the reverse side of their inability to give a satisfactory account of our relationship to our own bodies and of the behavioral intentionality that is at the heart of that relationship. If the confusions that dog our understanding of the body were dispelled, we might be in a position to extend the same form of analysis to the perception of the body of other persons, i. e., to a perception of them not as machines but as systems of comportment and modes of orientation within the same world in which I find myself. When my concepts of the body and of consciousness are not impoverished by being blown up to the point at which the one confronts the other statically in a relation of perfect correspondence and when both are understood in terms of a kind of incarnate intentionality, other persons need no longer represent a remote and forever inaccessible "inspection d'esprit" operating from beyond the barrier of the body. They can instead be recognized as presences within my perceptual world that are none the less real because they do not yield themselves up exhaustively in the way that a consistent phenomenalism would require.

These, then, are some of the main lines of Merleau-Ponty's critique of the intellectualistic and reductionistic tendencies that he imputes to "la pensée réflexive." His effort in each case is to show that the attempt to exhaust these different elements in our
perceptual world through an analysis in terms of their being for consciousness must fail. At the same time he is trying to do something more. By means of the often highly figurative language that he employs, he seeks to convey to us the mute presence of the things that are reached by our perceptions but never absorbed by them. In the working notes that accompany *Le visible et l'invisible* there is a brief passage in which Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that this presence of things is something of which we need to be reminded. Perhaps, he says, it is not just certain misconceived philosophies of perception but human perception itself that tends to become oblivious to itself as what he calls “perception sauvage” and “tends to see itself as an act and to forget its latent intentionality.” He further notes as a kind of paradox the fact that while “philosophy is language through and through it nevertheless consists in rediscovering silence.”

Clearly any attempt to achieve by means of language a new and deeper sensitivity to a dimension of the perceptual world that is opaque to conceptualization has its dangers, and Merleau-Ponty often seems to associate language so closely with conceptual thought as to make it quite unclear how it could possibly be a vehicle for the philosophical insights he wishes to make it convey. In any case, it is clear that his own philosophical practice logically commits him to the view that language *can* be so used; and the passages I have just quoted indicate that in that wider use it would serve a significant quasi-moral purpose by countering a tendency of human consciousness to close in upon itself.

IV

I now wish to take note very briefly of a similarity between Merleau-Ponty’s position as it emerges from the account I have given and certain views that are widely shared within the “ordinary language” wing of the analytical movement in philosophy. Both existential phenomenology as developed by Merleau-Ponty and ordinary language philosophy are concerned to vindicate the integrity of the familiar everyday world of what may be called

“middle-sized” objects as well as of the systems of reference by which the latter are delineated. This defense is intended as a rebuttal to both scientific and philosophical doctrines that cast doubt on the logical and ontological credentials of the entities that pass current in the world of perception and of precritical common sense. On the scientific side, a case has often been made, though with varying degrees of sophistication, for the view that nothing but atoms and molecules “really” exists and that perceptual objects and the statements we make about them must all be regarded as deriving in principle from the truths of microphysics. Against claims of this type Merleau-Ponty, like the neo-Wittgensteinians, defends the logical autonomy of the distinctions that block out our perceptual world; and he argues that the relation of dependence runs the other way, since the entities of theoretical physics would make no sense to a being who did not have the concept of a material object. This defense of the middle-ground constitutes at the same time a rejoinder to those philosophical doctrines, whether of logical atomism or absolute idealism, which seek to show that the objects of perception are either constructions out of ultimately simple units, whose existence has to be postulated for reasons that are completely independent of perception, or that such objects suffer from internal incoherencies that can be resolved only at the level of a monistically conceived absolute. While these quite different metaphysical positions may be more visible in the immediate intellectual background of ordinary language philosophy, their counterparts are also discernible among the predecessor philosophies to which the existentialists were to develop such a sharp allergy.

This affinity between Merleau-Ponty and the ordinary language analysts seems to me to be important and to deserve much more attention than it has so far received. But lest I should be thought to be proclaiming a new principle of philosophical oecumenism, I wish to conclude by drawing attention to two closely related

24. John Wild was one of the first to draw attention to this affinity in his article “Is there a World of Ordinary Language?”, Philosophical Review, LVII, No. 4 (1958).
respects in which Merleau-Ponty's position is noticeably at variance with the views of the analytical school. First, Merleau-Ponty never conceived of his own inquiries as having a purely logical or—even in a very broad sense of the term—"linguistic" import. It is true that he had substantial reservations about the Husserlian doctrine of categorial intuition; and his later essays in particular tend more and more toward a rather pragmatic-sounding account of the essential or structural features of consciousness as being those around which a more coherent and perspicuous conception of human subjectivity can be organized. It is also true that he recognized the importance of language as a medium in which some of our most fundamental modes of comportment toward the world are deployed. Nevertheless, it has to be made quite clear that Merleau-Ponty on several occasions explicitly rejected the view that the task of philosophy is simply to trace out the internal logic of established *Wortbedeutungen*. However important language and linguistic behavior might be as data for philosophical reflection, the portrait of the philosopher as a kind of glorified lexicographer, enjoying no freedom in the devising of more adequate linguistic instruments for the expression of the insights that philosophy seeks to gain, was obviously and deeply repellent to Merleau-Ponty.

The reasons for this attitude are not hard to divine, and they go to the heart of Merleau-Ponty's very marked differences with even those strains in analytical philosophy which might otherwise seem most congenial to his point of view. In spite of all his vindication of common sense and his defense of the integrity of the perceptual milieu, Merleau-Ponty's whole philosophical effort is quite clearly inspired by a sense of the profoundly mysterious and paradoxical character of human subjectivity. Nothing could be more alien to the spirit of his philosophy than the self-stultifying smugness of some contemporary masters of ordinary language in whom any residual tendency to philosophical puzzlement is checked by frequently consulting the O.E.D. Merleau-

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25. Perhaps his clearest statement of his views on this point is his brief contribution to the discussions held at Royaumont in 1957 which have been published in *La philosophie analytique* (Paris: 1962), pp. 93–96.
Ponty quite certainly had a good deal more in common with St. Augustine, who was similarly struck with wonder at the mysteries of human consciousness, than with those who wonder only at the puzzlement of others. Nor was he satisfied simply to describe the different systems of reference to the world and to let them subsist side by side in a kind of irenic pluralism. As his last work clearly shows, he felt that he must at least attempt to press further in the hope of gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of a world that can be approached and talked about in so many different ways. We cannot judge how successful that further inquiry would have proved to be. We must, however, feel a deep regret that it was not completed.